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cover illustration

Dave Garroway in the opening credits of NBC's *Wide Wide World*.

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VR in the ER: *ER*'s use of e-media

JEREMY G. BUTLER

In an attempt to generate media and public interest in *ER*'s fourth season, the debut was broadcast live and accompanied by several online events. NBC touted it as more than just a television broadcast: it was to be a 'cyber-event' – the first joint effort of NBC and Warner Bros Online.¹ 'Anything Can Happen On-Air or Online!', warned one breathless press release about this 'unprecedented' season premiere.² We were told to expect spontaneous, perhaps obscene, improvising and daring performances with no safety net. The tight hegemonic control that broadcast networks exercise over their programming was going to be rent asunder, we were led to believe.

Clearly, NBC succeeded in its attempts to create a media event with this broadcast. The episode scored a 31.2 Nielsen rating and a massive 46 share – making it the third most watched episode in the history of US television dramas, behind *Dallas*'s 'Who Shot J.R.?' episode (1980) and the series finale of *Magnum, P.I.* (1988).³ However, the 'liveness' of this live event was actually quite limited. The actors improvised very little – staying remarkably close to the script, according to the person who did the closed captioning – and there were few disruptions of the staging.⁴ Moreover, the success of its simultaneous cyber-event was debatable. Its website offered little more than text-based, behind-the-scenes chats with the cast and crew, a 'virtual tour' of its sets, and a few meagre RealVideo clips. This was hardly state-of-the-art digital technology for 1997.

What intrigues me about *ER* (the programme), 'Ambush' (the live episode) and *ERLive* (the website) is what they can tell us about the much-heralded 'convergence' of film, television and the digital realm. Within the past three years we have begun to see useful, interdisciplinary investigations into these converging media. Much as

1 'Press releases', *ERLive*. URL: <http://www.ERLive.com/press.html> [5 January 1998].

2 'Online events', *ERLive*. URL: <http://www.ERLive.com/events.html> [5 January 1998].

3 Ken Neville, 'Minor wounds, killer ratings for live "ER"', *E!online*. URL: <http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/0,1,1833,00.html> [28 February 2000].

4 Jack Spellman, 'Re: captions on live ER episode', e-mail to the author, 3 March 2000.

- 5 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema Television Video* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: the Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

- 6 Charles Derry, 'Television soap opera: incest, bigamy, and fatal disease', *Journal of the University Film and Video Association*, vol. 35, no. 1 (1983), pp. 4–16.
- 7 Jeremy G. Butler, 'Miami Vice: the legacy of Film Noir', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1985), pp. 126–38. Reprinted in Alain Silver and James Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight, 1996), pp. 288–305.

- 8 Ken Kwapis, telephone interview, 24 February 2000.

John Ellis's *Visible Fictions* mapped the media terrain of the 1980s, so have Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and Margaret Morse's *Virtualities* provided insights into film, television and digital media of the 1990s and beyond.⁵ Of course, much work remains to be done. What I propose to do here is offer some thoughts on *ER*'s use of the conventions of cinema, television, and the world wide web. My approach is mainly a stylistic/semiotic one. I am interested in identifying the stylistic conventions in the programme and its web presence and interrogating their signifying functions. How does *ER* use cinematic, televisual and digital apparatuses to construct an immensely popular, meaning-bearing cultural artefact?

Jean Renoir's legacy: *The Crime of M. Lange* comes to primetime television

Although many of its fans would bristle at the suggestion, *ER*'s thematic and narrative structures are virtually indistinguishable from less prestigious daytime soap operas. In both *ER* and soap opera, a large set of characters interact with one another in continuing stories, some of which take months to resolve. A quick examination of its narrative threads leads one to issues of birth, death, disease, guilt, innocence, gossip and romance – all of which have previously been identified in soap operas.⁶ And yet, *ER* is not perceived as a soap opera or 'normal' television. A large part of this perception is due to its 'cinematic' mise-en-scene and cinematography. Much like *Miami Vice* (1984–9), *ER* resembles a theatrically released film.⁷ This serves several functions, foremost of which is product differentiation. *ER*'s cinematic single-camera mode of production differentiates it from daytime soap opera. Its *particular use* of cinematic style helps set it apart from similarly themed primetime shows such as *Chicago Hope*, which premiered just one day before *ER* (18 and 19 September 1994). Aside from product differentiation, however, *ER*'s visual/audial style is significant as an emblem of media convergence. Examining *ER*'s articulation of cinematic style will thus help us understand how film and television are approaching one another, and also, as I will discuss later, how these two media are blending with digital media.

As one might expect from a programme named for a particular space (the emergency room), the design of *ER*'s space, of its set, is a critical part of its cinematic style. *ER* director Chris Misiano has said, 'The space is the through-line for the story'.⁸ The admitting desk and trauma and operating rooms are fundamental to the programme. They serve clear metaphoric functions as the physical incarnation and objective correlatives of birth, disease, violence and death. In this regard, they are not that different from daytime soap operas.

What is remarkable about *ER*'s set design is its three-dimensional articulation of space. To understand its significance, consider first the televisual norm in set design for fictional programmes. Daytime soap operas are shot on standing sets on a sound stage. Their three-walled sets are typically placed in a row – next to one another, but not connected by doorways or halls. The space of these sets is notably shallow – resembling sets done for live theatre with a conventional proscenium. Sitcoms shot before live audiences have developed similar conventions of set design – placing the raisers for the audience behind the cameras. On such shallow sets, the options for actor movement are rather limited. Directors must 'spread performers out like a clothes line', as David Bordwell has noted in regard to some early films.⁹ In such 'planimetric' staging (the term is art critic Heinrich Wölfflin's, borrowed by Bordwell), the actors seldom move towards or away from the camera.¹⁰ Rather, they shuffle back and forth on a plane perpendicular to the dominant camera angle. Or, in geometric terms, one could say they move principally along the x-axis (side-to-side) and seldom along the z-axis (back-and-forth) – as discussed by Herb Zettl.¹¹

In striking contrast, *ER*'s principal sets are constructed with four full walls. Some of these walls are 'wild', meaning they may be removed for additional shooting space, but reportedly the directors/producers prefer not to 'wild out' a wall.¹² Instead, the sets incorporate enough room to allow the presence of cast, crew and cameras within their four walls. Due to the capacious nature of the sets, *ER* sprawls over *four* sound stages on the Warner Bros lot in Burbank, California – occupying an enormous amount of studio real estate. One sound stage contains the admitting and trauma rooms. Two are devoted to the operating rooms, the 'clean' space, and the connecting hallways. The fourth is given over to 'swing sets' – sets which change based on the weekly needs of the story and include locations such as the apartments of the characters. These production decisions have evident aesthetic results. With four walls and connecting hallways, the blocking does not have to adhere to proscenium-based aesthetics. The actors may roam the sets at will (or, rather, at the will of the directors) and action may take place in depth.

This freedom of staging has an impact upon *ER*'s lighting design, which, ironically, reconnects *ER* with its daytime brethren. Because the staging moves fluidly and quickly through several rooms, the cinematographer must light all the rooms relatively evenly. Lighting a stage is a complicated and time-consuming task – made even more difficult in the case of *ER* by the inclusion of *ceilings* on many of the sets. In soap operas/sitcoms, the ceilings are left off so that the lighting grid may illuminate the sets. In *ER* the grid is partially blocked and lighting must be done from 'natural' sources within the frame. Although *ER* is one of the most expensive shows on

9 David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 168.

10 Ibid., p. 306.

11 Herb Zettl, *Sight Sound Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics*, third edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), pp. 141–63.

12 Kwapis, telephone interview.



Figs 1–3

13 Zettl, *Sight Sound Motion*, p. 41

television, it would be prohibitively expensive to light each shot as if in a feature film. Consequently, the lighting in *ER* is usually high key and flat – as was established very early in the programme's run. In fact, this shooting style was evident in the title sequence of the series premiere (figures 1–3).

Zettl maintains that flat lighting carries thematic connotations that contrast with low-key chiaroscuro lighting. Indeed, in *Sight Sound Motion* he happens to use a hospital corridor for a flat lighting example:

Due to the profuse amount of shadowless illumination and increased visibility, we are now inclined to feel that the corridor and so the entire hospital is clean and germ-free; nothing is hidden in dark corners; ... it is a place where we can easily find our way around; and its staff and doctors must be equally bright and efficient.¹³

Zettl's point does find application in *ER*. Cook County General Hospital (the programme's fictional setting) is indeed clean, sanitary and remarkably well equipped for an indigent care facility, but its staff and doctors are not always so 'bright and efficient'. Often as not, the literally bright illumination stands in counterpoint to the metaphoric darkness of emergency medicine and the doctors' flawed personal lives.

ER's kino-eye

I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. ... Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. ... I plunge and soar with plunging and soaring bodies. Now I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant, manoeuvring in the chaos of the moment, recording movement, starting with movements composed of the most complex combinations.¹⁴

ER's distinctive sets would be useless were it not for the programme's cinematography and overall mode of production. It is here that the programme firmly establishes its 'cinematic' character. While the majority of fictional programmes on television are shot using multiple-camera mode of production – as one can see in daytime soap operas and primetime sitcoms – *ER* is shot on 35mm film using single-camera mode of production. Of course, single-camera shooting is also the standard on all primetime dramas – from *Chicago Hope* to *NYPD Blue* (1993–), *Providence* (1999–) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–). The argument for the cinematic aesthetic of those programmes might also be made, but my point is that *ER* employs techniques that differentiate itself from both its

14 Dziga Vertov in Annette Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye: the Writings of Dziga Vertov* trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 17



Figs 4–9

15 Kwapis, telephone interview

narrative cousin, the soap opera, and other single-camera, primetime productions.

In multiple-camera shooting, two or three cameras peer into a set from outside its (absent) fourth wall – seldom entering the space of the set. It is almost as if they were covering a basketball game but were unable to set foot on the court. *ER* breaks the virtual proscenium and positions cameras within the set. This has a significant impact on the way that stories are told in *ER*. Cutting into the set permits the director to shift subtly the point of view of a scene. As the visual point of view shifts, the viewers' attention and, perhaps, their emotions shift as well. Ken Kwapis, director of 'Be Patient', stretches the 180-degree rule to the limit in the operating room scene in which Luka (Goran Visnjic) works on a young girl while her mother watches and Mark (Anthony Edwards) barks directions (figures 4–9). Kwapis cuts among the various participants – modulating the viewers' centre of attention and their emotional allegiances. A sequence of shots such as this could never have been achieved in a multiple-camera soap opera. The first cut within the 'proscenium' would reveal the other cameras looking on and the missing fourth wall of the room.

ER's principal visual strategy to avoid problems with the 180-degree rule and screen direction is to move the camera. When the camera arcs around a character, it quickly establishes new axes of action and reorients the viewer's sense of screen direction. A simple scene from 'Truth and Consequences' (directed by Steve de Jarnatt) incorporates relatively sophisticated camera movement arcing 360 degrees around Kerry (Laura Innes) and a patient, and showing all four walls of the set (figures 10–16, overleaf). These arcing, spinning camera movements are fundamental to *ER*'s signature style. Not only does movement such as this separate *ER* from soap opera, it also distinguishes it from other primetime drama – few of which employ much camera movement. Even the occasional programmes known for their camera movement – particularly Steven Bochco's *Hill Street Blues* (1981–7) and *NYPD Blue* – do not resemble *ER* in their implementation of it. Bochco's shows utilize overwrought handheld camera work while *ER* favours Steadicam shots. (Indeed, *ER* was among the first television programmes to employ a Steadicam everyday.)¹⁵

Steadicam movements are quite different from handheld movements – both in their appearance and in what they connote. In fictional contexts such as *NYPD Blue* and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), the stylistic cliché of handheld camera has come to signify a particular sense of realism rooted in cinema verité style (or, at least, in the common perception of cinema verité). The live episode of *ER* takes pains to repeatedly draw attention to this documentary signification. In the very first shot of 'Ambush,' a production assistant adjusts a fixed, wide-angle,



Figs 10–16

16 Peter Wollen, 'Godard and counter cinema', *Vent d'Est*, *Afterimage* no. 4 (Autumn 1975). Reprinted in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 79–91.

surveillance-style camera in the lounge (figures 17–18). He dusts the lens as he looks directly into it – signaling to the viewer that this is not a normal broadcast of *ER*, that the camera will be acknowledged. But we should be clear about this. The camera that is acknowledged is still folded within the fiction. This is not counter cinema where the televisual/cinematic apparatus itself is foregrounded.¹⁶ Just as the production assistant is a character within the diegesis, so is the camera that is acknowledged part of the diegetic world. In this instance, however, a diegetic camera and the non-diegetic camera (the one positioned by *ER* director Thomas Schlamme) record the same images. The signification process of the non-diegetic camera is repressed (*histoire*) while the diegetic camera is marked as a signifier of documentariness. Moreover, the focal length and high camera angle of the episode's first shot signify a new type of documentariness that is currently evolving – nurtured by the surveillance camera footage of robberies and employee misbehaviour shown on nightly news broadcasts and so-called 'reality' specials on Fox.¹⁷

The diegetic production assistant explains the function of the break-room camera to Carol (Julianna Margulies): 'Get some wide-angles to cut with what the handheld guys shoot. For pace, variety.' From this wide-angle shot we cut to one of the 'handheld guys' cameras and the episode is up and running – sometimes literally as when we see the camera operator's feet as he struggles to follow the action. Here, as in 'X-Cops', the *X-Files* episode (20 February 2000) presented as if it were *Cops* (1989–), handheld camera work has obvious documentary connotations.¹⁸ To be precise, however, 'Ambush' uses Steadicam shots posing as handheld ones – with significantly steadier results.

'Ambush' aside, *ER*'s numerous Steadicam shots do not normally share these connotations of documentariness with the handheld camera. As Jean-Pierre Geuens has noted, Steadicam movements more closely resemble cinematic tracking shots – effortlessly gliding around the actors – than they do jittery handheld work. He then takes this argument a step further and separates Steadicam movement from dollying or tracking. The Steadicam, he avers, 'disembodies vision': 'As a made-to-order companion, the floating, impersonal, inhuman presence penetrates space, appropriating it for the decentred, transnational, postindustrial corporate state of the late twentieth century'.¹⁹ Although I am not prepared to argue that Steadicam shots are some sort of panoptic confirmation of the postindustrial corporate state, I do believe that Steadicams move differently from humans. They move in the same way as tracking cameras associated with the cinema – exemplified in the opening of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) and the murder scene in Jean Renoir's *The Crime of M. Lange* (1936). The *Lange* scene consists principally of two 180-degree movements cut together into a 360-degree pan/track/crane



Figs 17–18



Figs 19–20



Fig 21

around a courtyard. André Bazin calls it the 'pure spatial expression of the entire *mise en scène*'.²⁰ *ER*'s Steadicam movements function similarly. With camera movements rooted in the cinematic, single-camera mode of production – and nearly impossible in multiple-camera mode – the all-important space of the emergency room, the programme's *raison d'être*, is constantly re-articulated. In sum, then, the Steadicam is a marker of a cinematic aesthetic, of prestige, of a text that might have been directed by Welles or Renoir. It thus helps differentiate *ER* as a televisual product. It also solves the problem of maintaining/modifying screen direction on sets that encourage staging along x-, y- and z-axes.

One final, subtle signifier of cinematic style is the control over framing that is permitted by a single-camera mode of production. This is true of stationary shots, but is even more evident in moving camera shots. Consider a simple 'walk-and-talk' scene from 'Be Patient' (figures 19–20). Elisabeth (Alex Kingston) is talking to Mark about a night out his father has planned. Mark has just learned his father has lung cancer and is concerned about him. Note that director Kwapis has selected a slightly high-angle shot, one that makes Mark more prominent in the frame even though Elisabeth has most of the lines. In this fashion, the viewer's attention is subtly directed toward him, despite his near silence. Further, the scene begins with a low-angle shot showing the entire hallway and its ceiling (figure 21; cf. figures 1–3). Obviously, a multiple-camera shoot would not normally position the camera that low, as it would show the lighting grid. And, although a multiple-camera production could conceivably dolly next to a pair of conversing actors with an elevated camera, the reality of that mode of production is that they would not have time to set it up. The point is not that multiple-camera productions are slipshod, but that they have developed a different method for dealing with production issues. Soap operas are taped much like a recording of a play. The director has worked out an intricate choreography of actors and cameras. The camera operators know where the actors will be moving and where they should be at a particular point in the script, but beyond that the camera operators must struggle to keep up with the actors. This results in framing that is more approximate, that sometimes even misses action that would be included in a single-camera production.²¹

What is the significance of this approximate framing? One connotation of it is that it makes soap operas *appear* as if they were being broadcast live. They resemble television coverage of sports and other live events where important action is sometimes missed. This lends credence to John Ellis's argument:

Television presents itself as an immediate presence. . . . Television pretends to actuality, to immediacy; the television image in many transmissions (news, current affairs, chat shows, announcements)

²¹ For more on Fox 'reality' programmes, see Tarleton Gillespie, 'Narrative control and visual polysemy: Fox surveillance specials and the limits of legitimization', *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 45 (2000), pp. 36–49.

- 18 It goes without saying that handheld shots do not always signify this documentariness. Most commonly they are used to signify subjective camera, as may be seen in innumerable scenes of characters stalking one another. Further, the initial popularity of handheld shots – in the early 1960s under the influence of French new wave directors – was also interpreted as emblematic of modern disorientation and angst.
- 19 Jean-Pierre Geuens, 'Visuality and power: the work of the Steadicam', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 2 (1993–4), p. 16.
- 20 André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, trans. W. W. Halsey II and William H. Simon (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 46.
- 21 For examples from *As the World Turns*, see Jeremy G. Butler, 'Notes on the soap opera apparatus: televisual style and *As the World Turns*', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1986), p. 59.
- 22 Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, p. 106.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 24 Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the image', in Stephen Heath (ed. and trans.), *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 44.
- 25 Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'Television, a world in action', *Screen*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1977), p. 61.

- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–59.

behaves as though it were live and uses the techniques of direct address.²²

Ellis builds upon Roland Barthes's notion of a 'photo effect', the basic premiss of which is that photographs and theatrical films carry a signifier of 'this is was', a 'presence-absence'.²³ A photograph of a birthday party or soldiers raising the US flag on Iwo Jima signifies: 'this event happened *in the past* and it happened *elsewhere*'. In Barthes's words:

The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing . . . but an awareness of its *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*.²⁴

For Barthes, the cinema began to break down the photo effect. For Ellis, television goes even further in this direction. As Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow have similarly argued, 'The immediate time of the [television] image is pulled into a confusion with the time of the events shown, tending to diminish the impression of the mode of presence in absence characteristic of film, suggesting a permanently alive view of the world; the generalized fantasy of the television institution of the image is exactly that it is *direct*, and direct for *me*'.²⁵ This holds true for television soap opera, but what of *ER* and its apparently *cinematic* presence in absence? And what are we to make of *ER*'s choice to promote *presence-presence* by broadcasting live, directly to the US viewer?

On 25 September 1997, *ER*'s producers resurrected broadcasting practices from the 1950s with the live telecast of 'Ambush'. It was hardly the 'unprecedented' event that NBC publicists trumpeted in the press releases. During the 1950s and early 1960s, live telecasts were the everyday mode of production for *ER*'s close relation, the soap opera, and, as Ellis and Heath and Skirrow contend, liveness and simultaneity persist as television's dominant mode.²⁶ *ER*'s use of liveness, however, was not a simple return to the days of live telecasts of *The Guiding Light* (1952–) and *Playhouse 90* (1956–61). In its own way, it pulled the viewer into new forms of confusion. Unlike previous live drama on television, 'Ambush' did not use multiple cameras in individual scenes. Even though it was shot with eleven different cameras, they were not used in a conventional three-camera configuration on individual sets. Instead, single video (not film) cameras shot individual scenes with Steadicams that evoked cinema verité-style videotaping and drew attention to the televisual apparatus itself – as when the production assistant adjusts the surveillance camera. 'Ambush' also provides a unique instance for the analysis of approximate framing in live or live-on-tape telecasts.

27 Viewers in the Mountain time zone saw a tape of the Eastern/Central broadcast



Figs 22–23



Figs 24–25

28 For additional differences between the two, see Neville, 'Minor wounds, killer ratings for live "ER"'

Because the show was broadcast live twice – once for the Eastern and Central time zones and once for the Pacific – one can see the small adjustments camera operators made during the telecasts.²⁷ For instance, Anna (Maria Bello) assists Doug (George Clooney) as he treats a baby who has been bitten. In both versions, similar framing is used for a line of dialogue in which Doug asks Anna for more light – although the East Coast version is framed more tightly than the West Coast and the baby is crying in the former, but not in the latter (figures 22–23). When Anna swings a light over the bed in the East Coast version we do not see her do it, although we do see the additional illumination. In the West Coast version, we see her arm in the frame (figures 24–25). Although these are obviously minor differences, they do illustrate the approximate nature of framing in live and live-on-tape modes of production.²⁸

The irony here is that the live broadcast was presented as if it were *not* live, as if we were viewing videotape that had been shot previously for a documentary about the emergency room – much like the 'found' film/tape in *The Blair Witch Project*. In this regard it also resembles *Cops*, where the viewer recognizes that it is tape of past events – despite television's strong evocation of simultaneity. *The X-Files*' mock documentary, 'X-Cops', illustrates this confusion well. Mulder (David Duchovny) and Scully (Gillian Anderson) track a monster in Los Angeles while a *Cops* camera crew tapes the incident. Scully resents the intrusion and complains to Mulder about being on 'live TV'. Mulder responds, 'It's not live. She just said [bleep]' – referring to an expletive ostensibly censored by the *Cops* producers. Or rather, he refers to an expletive censored by the fictive *Cops* producers within the *X-Files* diegesis. Obviously, documentary telecasts can be live and, perhaps less obviously, most television programmes carry connotations of liveness, but 'Ambush', 'X-Cops' and *The Blair Witch Project* all suggest that their presents are past. Only in the case of 'Ambush' does that paradoxically double back on itself, when actors in the present – performing at the same time that we are watching – pretend to be characters in a videotape of the past.

Re-presenting *ER* on the web: *ERTV* and *ERLive*

I have established that *ER* is a television programme grounded in its fluid visual style – a style that cuts across media boundaries, linking it specifically with the cinematic medium. *ER*, as with all television programmes since the late 1990s, also has a substantial web presence – starting with the Warner Bros official website (*ERTV*) and the site created by Warner Bros and NBC specifically for the 'cyber-event' of the live broadcast (*ERLive*). My interest in these sites is primarily stylistic. Can a programme that places so much emphasis on visual

movement translate that kinetic energy to the web? This question leads me to a consideration of onscreen movement in web pages. Is there an equivalent to the Steadicam on the web or in other digital media such as video games?

Mark J.P. Wolf has created a taxonomy of on- and offscreen space in video games.²⁹ His article provides a starting point for an understanding of the articulation of space in web pages, which, in many respects, closely resemble video games. Both web pages and video games appear on computer monitors. Both contain many images that have been wholly digitally generated – possessing no ‘real world’ referent. (That is, these computer-generated images are not ‘iconic’, in C.S. Peirce’s sense.) Both contain illusions of movement. And, perhaps most significantly, the movement in both can be interactive, it can depend upon the input of users. A full taxonomy of space and movement on the web is beyond the scope of this paper, but I shall present a few thoughts on spatial articulation on the web as it appears in *ERTV* and *ERLive*.

The first and least revolutionary form of movement on web pages is that which it inherited from the cinema and television: video clips and conventional animation. Just as spectators cannot control the editing or the Steadicam moves they witness while watching *ER*, neither can they control the website’s video clips or influence the GIF animation dancing through the banner ads. *ER*’s websites’ banner ads and pedestrian RealVideo clips of the cast and crew – as with the photographs and *ER* theme music – are positioned on the web pages as if they were photographs and scraps of memorabilia placed into a photo album. As Janet Murray argues, ‘The equivalent of the filmed play of the early 1900s is the multimedia scrapbook . . . which takes advantage of the novelty of computer delivery without utilizing its intrinsic properties’.³⁰ To her filmed plays we might add the televised plays of the 1950s, which took advantage of television’s novel delivery system without exploring its intrinsic properties. But television and the process of television viewing have evolved significantly since its so-called Golden Age. *ER*, with its shattered proscenium arch, illustrates just how television might differ from the theatrical drama. Further, the VCR and the remote control have radically altered the viewer’s power over the television. As John Caldwell contends: ‘Increasingly, television has come to be associated more with something you can hold, push into an appliance, and physically move around with a controller’.³¹ In short, television has become increasingly interactive. Similarly, it is in interactive movement that we will find one of the truly revolutionary characteristics of the digital realm.

For Murray, interactivity and movement are inextricably interwoven in ‘four essential properties’ of digital environments: ‘Digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial and encyclopedic’.³² The first two properties, in her view, are what define

²⁹ Mark J.P. Wolf, ‘Inventing space: toward a taxonomy of on- and off-screen space in video games’, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 1 (1997), pp. 11–23.

³⁰ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 57.

³¹ John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 264.

³² Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 71.

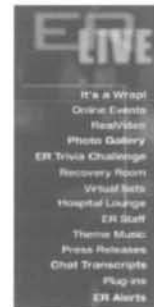
interactivity. We may *participate* in a digital world by clicking buttons with our mouse, manipulating a joystick or wearing a virtual reality helmet; and that world will respond with behaviours that are grounded in certain *procedures* or rules. Murray continues,

'Procedural environments are appealing to us not just because they exhibit rule-generated behaviour, but because we can induce the behaviour. They are responsive to our input.'³³ Murray's insight helps us understand the unique function of space and, more importantly, the function of *movement* on the web and in other digital environments. As she puts it:

The new digital environments are characterized by their power to represent navigable space. Linear media such as books and films can portray space, either by verbal description or image, but only digital environments can present *space that we can move through* (emphasis mine).³⁴

Thus Murray identifies navigable space as one of the key pleasures of web browsing or other activities in digital environments.

Returning to our specific examples of *ERTV* and *ERLive*, we can see how significant navigation is. Each homepage presents a navigation scheme – as may be seen in these details from *ERTV* and *ERLive* as they appeared in 1998 (figures 26–27). Although both



Figs 26–27

seem to be just text, just lists of words, they actually have a spatiality. In HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) terminology, they are 'image maps' – with *ERTV*'s oriented horizontally and *ERLive*'s vertically. The spot, the space, that users click determines what they will see next. Thus, in web pages, text *is* space. Clicking on an image map or on a regular bit of text that has been programmed as a hypertext link allows users to metaphorically 'move' to another location, another web page. But this is not literal movement. The text/graphics of one page do not usually slide off the screen while another slides on – as does a video wipe. Rather, the space of one page is replaced by that of another – more like the displacement that happens when an editor makes an Eisensteinian montage of attractions or a television viewer changes channels with a remote control. Similarly, the 2000 version of *ERTV* incorporates spatial

displacement in its navigation scheme. When one rolls over the navigation text with the mouse cursor, the text changes – indicating one's choices if one clicks that spot (figures 28–29). Mouse 'rollovers' are constructed using a programming language (JavaScript) and are thus an illustration of the inducing of rule-based behaviour.



Figs 28–29

Displacement and hypertextual 'movement' are not the only forms of spatial activity on the web. We can also identify movements in the web environment that are quite literal. The simplest and most fundamental is the movement of the mouse-controlled cursor across the screen. I shall dissect this simple, but consequential, interaction: users roll a ball mechanism which rubs x- and y-axis rollers inside the mouse and the cursor responds by moving along those axes. For users who have grown up on computers with graphical user interfaces (GUI), it seems unimaginable that computers would ever function without the mouse; but, of course, the GUI is a relatively recent phenomenon. Up until the mid-1980s, most computer users were staring at text-filled screens and cursors were mainly controlled by the keyboard on strict x- and y-axes. Whether mouse- or key-controlled, the cursor is central to web interactivity. It is the main embodiment on screen of what Murray calls 'agency': 'the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices'.³⁵ The placement of the cursor upon the web page and the pressing of a mouse button results in the predominant user-controlled movements on web pages: vertical and, to a lesser extent, horizontal 'scrolling'.

In Wolf's taxonomy of on- and offscreen movement in computer-based games, he notes the significance of scrolling movements. Scrolling video games – as with scrolling web pages – move fixed screen elements (text and graphics) up and down or side to side. Early video games from the late 1970s and 1980s tended to scroll on a single axis – whether horizontally (Wolf notes *Defender* [1982], *Stampede* [1981], *Space Jockey* [1982]) or vertically (Wolf notes *Skiing* [1980] and *Street Racer* [1978]). Our initial sense of power over the web page comes from this ability to scroll, to decide what shall be on screen and what shall be off. This scrolling is a very basic form of visual navigation. By manipulating the mouse or the keyboard we can explore the navigable space of the page. This is quite unlike anything one can do at the cinema or while watching television, where the border between on- and offscreen space is

35 Ibid., p. 126

always strictly determined by the director and the camera operators. On the web, that border becomes malleable.

The metaphorically loaded terms 'scrolling' and 'web page' help us to understand an important property of this movement. Just like the turning of a paper scroll or the movement of a paper page on a desk, the motion of web pages is planimetric – as in Bordwell's discussion of film staging. The space is flat, with little sense of a third, z-axis poking out at the viewer or receding into the background. Planimetric web movement is like the sliding of a typewritten page across a desk. It is true that web pages can develop a sense of depth, but it is still planimetric. In Bordwell's *On the History of Film Style*, he discusses planimetric staging in the silent film *Barbe Bleu* (1907). In one shot, there are two distinct planes of action (a woman in the foreground and several women, in a line, in the background), but, as Bordwell notes, 'In such compositions each layer lies parallel to the picture plane and often to the background planes as well. . . . A sense of depth is conveyed primarily through comparative size and overlapping edges.'³⁶ In the *ER* web pages there are background images above which the text appears to float (figures 30–31). Thus, just as in *Barbe Bleu*, there are two planes but they do not connect to one another – much like the animation created by Disney's multi-plane camera.

³⁶ Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, p. 168.



Figs 30–31

The earliest web pages – constructed solely of text and no images – only allowed vertical scrolling of the text. There was no horizontal movement because the width of the text would automatically adjust to the width of users' browsers and thus horizontal scrolling was unnecessary. Moreover, the page usually loaded at its top, which meant that the vertical movement was only in one direction – downward. The introduction of images and HTML 'tables' to the web, and the release of the first widely popular browser with a GUI (NCSA Mosaic, 1993) created the need/ability for horizontal scrolling, but only in one direction. Images/text could now extend beyond the right side of the browser and the user could scroll to the right (and the right only) to view them. When viewed on a standard sized monitor (800×600 pixels), the two *ER* homepages only permit vertical scrolling because their graphics/text are narrower than the standard width.³⁷ Since the entire width of the image is immediately

³⁷ Using a fixed width table, *ERTV's* main page is set to a width of 500 pixels while *ERLive's* width is 600 pixels.

38 John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

visible, there is no need for scrolling. However, both pages are longer than the standard height and thus they permit or induce the user to move the page downward.

The shape of the browser 'window' – its aspect ratio – is yet another source of user agency that is quite distinct from television and film. As the film and television industries know from the battles over widescreen, over letterboxing, and now over the 16:9 ratio of high-definition television, aspect ratio can be a volatile subject – with both aesthetic, technological and economic ramifications.³⁸ But, much like Steadicam movements, aspect ratio is not something the TV or film viewer can influence. Aside from choosing whether to view a letterbox or pan-and-scan version of a film that's been transferred to video, viewers of cinematic/televisual texts have no control over aspect ratio. It is somewhat startling, then, to realize that web users have full control over the size of their browser windows. Browser resizing is a form of animation, of movement, over which users hold full agency. They decide if they will view the web at 640×480, 800×600, 1024×768 pixels or *anywhere in between*. Users need not even respect the 1.33:1 ratio that determines the outer bounds of the monitor screen. To a large extent, then, the designer's carefully conceived use of space must submit to the users' choice. In some respects, the evolution of scrolling has been marked by a battle for agency between users and designers – with the designers gradually asserting more and more control. New graphic design software and programming/scripting languages such as Macromedia Flash and DHTML (Dynamic Hypertext Markup Language), respectively, empower designers with the ability to determine the spatial layout of the screen and limit users' ability to change it.

Beyond planimetric movement: going 'deep inside the hidden areas'

ERLIVE.com [takes] you straight to the set with our very own Virtual Reality Sets. Rush into the Admitting Area, take a break in the Hospital Lounge, and visit the hectic Trauma Center – all from the comfort of your very own computer screen! With your mouse and keyboard, you can go deep inside the hidden areas of the ER! Click here to begin your tour of the Virtual Reality Sets!³⁹

39 'It's a WRAP!!!', *ERLive*. URL: <http://www.ERLive.com/wrap.html> [5 January 1998].

The history of visual media is littered with promises of full verisimilitude, of total television and cinema, of a simulacrum that is indistinguishable from reality. Ad copy for Cinerama, for instance, claimed, 'you won't be gazing at a movie screen – you'll find yourself swept right *into* the picture, surrounded with sight and sound'.⁴⁰ To prove their point they provided images of a man in a movie seat flying over water skiers in bikinis and a woman levitating in the middle of a concert hall. Similarly, *ERLive* promises to take

40 Quoted in Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, p. 98.

- 41 QuickTime VR Authoring URL
<http://www.apple.com/quicktime.qtvr> [12 June 2000].
- 42 Morse *Virtualities*, p. 91.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 45 *ER*'s 'sinuous z-axis moves' have been commented on by Morse, *Virtualities*, p. 224.

Fig 32



us 'deep inside the hidden areas of the ER'. In short, it promises immersive movement along the z-axis (that is, in depth). It should be no surprise that Cinerama and *ERLive* fail to deliver on their promises, but I find their failures interesting and instructive – helping us to understand what virtual reality is not.

ERLive's 'Virtual Tour' consists of three Quicktime VR 'movies', as they are called by Apple:⁴¹ 'Admitting Area', 'Hospital Lounge', and 'Trauma Center'. They are blandly presented on the *ERLive* 'Quicktime VR' page, in an style that recalls Murray's 'multimedia scrapbook' (figure 32). An image from the movie entices users to

click on the word 'Windows' or 'Mac' to load the version appropriate to their platforms. By moving the mouse over the VR image, they may pan right or left and, to a much lesser extent, they may even tilt up or down (for example, the QuickTime VR movie of the Admitting Area; figures 33–36). The only other permitted movement is a zoom, where a section of the image is enlarged or reduced (such as a zoom in on the ER doors; figure 37). Thus, there is movement here and the inducement of human agency, but is it really virtual reality?

In her chapter on 'Television graphics and the visual body: words on the move', Morse describes the 'weightless flight' of television spectators as they watch words and graphic design elements fly towards and 'past' them.⁴² 'A development began in television graphics at the end of the 1960s', she notes, 'when a vortex seemed to pull the viewer virtually "inside" the [television] set and into a miniature cosmos occupied by an animated logo'.⁴³ For Morse these moving, twisting, gyrating textual objects reveal a back side of the text. We are allowed to view 'precisely what is forbidden in monocular perspective and, one might add, representation in the photograph and the classic fiction film'.⁴⁴ The 'hidden areas' of *ERLive*'s 'Virtual Reality Sets' promise us a similar forbidden pleasure. They offer to show us the opposite side of the 180-degree line, the reverse angle that classical cinema represses. The irony of such a promise in *ER* is that its directors have already revealed all four walls of the programme's sets – through the use of the Steadicam (cf. figures 10–16). In a sense, there is nothing new or forbidden to see.⁴⁵



Figs 33–37

- 46 Wolf, 'Inventing space', p. 20.
 47 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 129.
 48 Morse, *Virtualities*, p. 71.
 49 *Ibid.*, p. 20. It will be interesting to see how the personal video recorder (PVR) – also known as the digital video recorder (DVR) – will affect viewers' sense of time and interactivity. William Boddy provides an early assessment of the possible impact of devices such as TiVo. William Boddy, 'Television in transit', *Screen*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2000), pp. 67–72.

Fig. 38



Fig. 39



Fig. 40



Fig. 41



Fig. 42



There is more to the allure of VR than just the uncovering of normally forbidden space – although the ability to go into virtual worlds that would be too dangerous or physically impossible for real humans is indeed quite significant. This, for example, is why the US military has invested so heavily in flight simulators. They permit pilots virtually to experience dangerous situations without placing themselves at risk. Still, this is not the defining characteristic of VR. What truly makes VR a virtual simulacrum of its referent is the illusion of z-axis movement under the control of the user. The sense of agency is, of course, paramount. Morse's flying logos are not true virtual realities because viewers have no control over them. Their 'weightless flight' is piloted by the televisual apparatus. Consumers did not become their own pilots (and tank commanders and race-car drivers) until the arrival of video game arcades in the 1980s. According to Wolf, 'The first commercial game to offer a first-person perspective of an interactive three-dimensional environment was the arcade game *BattleZone* (1980).'⁴⁶ *BattleZone*'s virtual world is constructed of stick-figure tanks and mountains; but despite its crudity it generates a strong sense of immersion, of *being* in that world because of the user's ability to move on the z-axis (figure 38). The 1998 remake of *BattleZone* for the personal computer (figure 39) and popular 'first-person shooter' games of the 1990s – such as *Doom* (1993; figure 40), *Half-Life* (1998; figure 41), *Quake* (1996), and, most recently, *Quake III Arena* (2000, figure 42) – have progressively improved the verisimilitude of these virtual realms, but the principle of navigable space remains the same. As the user navigates these computer-generated realms, a first-person narrative evolves and it evolves in real time: 'I am moving, commanding, my tank through this world. A tank shoots at me. I shoot back. A missile attacks me and I'm killed.' Murray specifies some of the 'pleasures specific to intentional navigation: orienting ourselves by landmarks, mapping a space mentally to match our experience, and admiring the juxtapositions and changes in the perspective that derive from moving through an intricate environment'.⁴⁷

Morse calls these sorts of environments 'fictions of presence' in that the space and time of the simulacrum is the same as that of the user/viewer/interactor.⁴⁸ Echoing Barthes's 'photo effect' and the application of it to television by Heath and Skirrow and Ellis, she maintains that print and film 'media represent a world that is past and elsewhere; television and the computer *present* virtually shared worlds, unfolding temporally in some virtual relation to our own, if not always actually simultaneously'.⁴⁹ This emphasis on the time of virtual reality is also stressed by Lev Manovich. In 'An archeology of a computer screen', he charts the evolution of the screen from the 'classical screen' of Renaissance painting to the 'dynamic screen' of the cinema and

50 Lev Manovich, 'An archeology of a computer screen', *Lev Manovich* URL http://www.apparitions.ucsd.edu/~manovich/text/digital_nature.html [10 June 2000]



Fig. 43

51 Zettl, *Sight Sound Motion*, p. 255

television.⁵⁰ For him the defining characteristic of the computer screen is its ability to interact with the user in real time. Hence, he refers to it as the 'real-time screen'.

Thus we arrive at what Morse, Murray, Manovich, and others propose as the generally accepted axioms of virtual reality:

- 1 Navigable space,
- 2 Movement along the z-axis,
- 3 User control of that movement,
- 4 A virtual sense of shared space, and
- 5 A match of the time of the signification with the time of the user.

To understand how and why *ER*'s VR fails to meet these criteria it is useful to understand a little about how Quicktime VR movies are created. Quicktime VRs are constructed from still photos of a space. The camera is rotated on a tripod and one image is taken every thirty degrees (more or less). The photos are loaded into a Quicktime VR programme and similar points on the adjoining images are matched. Based on these matching points, the photos are then stitched together. This creates one long continuous photograph – a panorama that can be viewed flat (in an aspect ratio even wider than Cinerama) or looped together into a 360-degree image, as has been done on *ERLive*. A Quicktime VR 'movie' is, therefore, no movie at all. Essentially, it is a cylindrical still image that places the spectator in the centre of the cylinder. It is as if one were inside a zoetrope looking out (figure 43). There are several implications to this.

First, the argument may well be made that since these unmoving 'movies' are just still photographs they present a digitized photo effect. They have a very strong sense of 'this is was', of 'presence-absence', in John Ellis's words. 'These *were* the sets of the programme *ER*', they seem to signify. Not 'These *are* the sets, and you *are* moving inside them'. The immediacy that comes with immersion into a virtual reality is absent. Second, there is no true z-axis movement. The zooms in Quicktime VR do not actually change the angle of view, the perspective, of the spectator. Rather, they simply enlarge the image itself – appearing to bring it closer to you (or, of course, shrinking it or moving it father away; cf. figures 36–37). As Zettl argues, 'When zooming in on an event, the event seems to come toward you. . . . During a dolly-in, you will seem to be moving with the camera toward the event.'⁵¹ In the case of the digital medium, this enlargement blows up the pixels – quickly leading to blocky distortion and the breakdown of the illusion of reality (cf. figure 37). It is impossible to maintain an illusion of reality when the constituent elements of the image are made so obvious. True, these zooms are under the control of the user and thus provide some sense of agency, but they fall well short of virtual reality because they lack the 'juxtapositions and changes in the perspective that derive from moving through an intricate

environment'.⁵² Without the change in perspective, there is no sense of user mobility.

Further, there are no moving objects or characters within these sets. This stands in stark contrast to the hectic visual style of the programme – where cameras and actors are constantly careering towards one another. Doctors Benton, Greene, Weaver and the rest are but ghostly presences in these virtual spaces. In *BattleZone*, *Doom* and many other games, tanks, missiles, and combatants rush along the z-axis toward the users – interacting with them in ways that threaten their virtual lives. A true VR realm based upon *ER* would take a page from ELIZA, one of the first artificial intelligences on the web. Developed by Joseph Weizenbaum in 1966, ELIZA's users typed questions to 'her' and she would respond with therapeutic replies. Blending ELIZA with *Doom*, one can imagine an *ER* VR in which – with a palpable sense of *real time* – the user *chooses* (agency) to be a doctor or a patient and *moves through* (z-axis) hallways and into the trauma room where virtual lives could be saved or lost. In the place of *Doom*'s monsters, speeding at us with weapons firing, we could find Dr Eliza on a psych consult – extending a sympathetic hand along the z-axis.

Conclusion: divergence in converging times

In *ER*, we see the effects of techno-industrial convergence and competition upon contemporary television. It has been obvious since the advent of cable television that the old broadcast models will not last forever. This has never been more evident than it is now. Between 1997 and 1999, the average annual hours per person spent watching US broadcast television dropped by 9.3%, while online and video-game time has increased 126.6%.⁵³ *ER*'s response to the threats of competitors and converging technology has combined the aesthetics of an older, more prestigious medium (the cinema) with the technologies of newer media (the web and VR movies) whose prestige factor remains arguable but which inevitably generate curiosity, debate and viewers. This pastiche, I maintain, has succeeded more in its skilful application of cinematic style than it has in its pale attempts at virtual reality, but its overall success can not be disputed – as *ER*'s consistently high Nielsen ratings attest.

Ratings success aside, *ER*'s attempts at distinguishing itself from the rest of television illustrate the stylistic function of product differentiation. In a time of convergence, *ER* strains to diverge from the pack, to establish a unique (for television) visual style and incorporate elements of new media. In so doing, it provides an interesting test case for the signifying function of style. Unusual production practices like the live show, unconventional set design and camera movement, and digital media such as web pages and VR

53 'Mass distraction: media consumption in dollars and hours', *Wired* (May 2000), p. 105.

movies are employed in its battle for uniqueness. *ER*'s disturbances of conventional television style allow us to examine anew the significance of television style and gauge its strategies for making meaning.

As the earth spins: NBC's *Wide Wide World* and live global television in the 1950s

LISA PARKS

Those who switched on their television sets on 31 December 1999 witnessed a panoply of images gleaned from year 2000 celebrations around the globe, an unfolding tapestry of simultaneous celebration. On CNN viewers spotted fireworks in Sydney harbour, Easter Island at dawn, the Eiffel Tower exploding with jewel-like pyrotechnics and waves of colour engulfing Big Ben. While this twenty-four-hour coverage linked the world in time and space, narrators were careful to distinguish the modern from the primitive, the fast from the slow, the high tech from the low. CNN's millenium coverage is the most recent moment in what could be described as a genealogy of live global television. The millenium kickoff was perhaps the fullest expression to date of television's ongoing celebration of its own ability to craft a global moment. This phenomenon is not, of course, a new development.

While many media scholars associate the globalization of television with the rise of satellite communication during the 1960s and 1970s or with the formation of CNN in the 1980s, I want to turn attention back to the 1950s, when a very unusual series appeared on US television. Developed by NBC's Special Events Department, *Wide Wide World* premiered on Producers Showcase in June 1955 and was broadcast as a bi-monthly series until 1958. Scheduled for alternate Sunday afternoons at four o'clock against ABC football and CBS's *Omnibus*, *Wide Wide World* attracted large audiences in a slot previously unsold by the network.¹ The

¹ Letter to Kenneth Bilby from Davidson Taylor, 14 March 1957, Richard Pinkham Papers, Box 141, File 17, 'Wide Wide World, 1956-7', NBC Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

2 Stanley Frank, 'Super-blooper TV show', *Saturday Evening Post*, 13 October 1956, p. 46.

3 NBC Promotional package, circa 1955, Michael Dann Papers, Box 378, File 15, 'Wide Wide World 1954-5', NBC Collection.

4 Quoted in Eric Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 169.

5 Pat Weaver, 'The Wide Wide World,' circa 1953, McGarret Papers, Box 384, File 15, NBC Collection.

ninety-minute programme exploited the potential of live television transmission, immersing its thirty million viewers in a virtual window on the world – or at least certain parts of it.² NBC promised to take viewers 'beyond the front door and the county line', not only to cities across the USA but to Canada, Mexico and Cuba.³ To do so, NBC combined its remote-equipment resources with those of its local and international affiliates. Whereas most 1950s television shows were produced in studios, *Wide Wide World* was largely shot on location. In this it is one of the earliest programmes to explore modes of production that have since become the hallmarks of live global television – location shooting, coverage of simultaneous but distant events, and national and international distribution.

When *Wide Wide World* premiered in 1955, liveness was certainly nothing new in television. Live anthology dramas such as *Studio One*, *Kraft Star Theater* and *Philco Playhouse* had dominated the primetime schedule during the early 1950s. By the mid to late 1950s, however, live drama gave way to telefilm and the networks began to explore formats that would differentiate television from the Hollywood motion pictures. *Wide Wide World* combined the liveness and theatricality of the anthology drama with the conventions of early news programmes such as *Camel News Caravan*, a prototypical network news programme that, as anchor John Cameron Swayze explained, covered world affairs by 'hopscoching the world for headlines'.⁴ But while NBC's fifteen-minute news programme used newsreel footage to cover world events that had already transpired, *Wide Wide World* further elaborated the practice of 'televisual hopscoch' by assembling a collection of live feeds from distant places simultaneously on the small screen. As a live, remote and international programme, *Wide Wide World* represented what might best be described as an anti-studio sensibility in early television. As NBC president Pat Weaver proudly declared, *Wide Wide World* 'Takes you OUT. It takes you THERE. It puts you in IT.'⁵ Even though Weaver's new series was renowned for its live scenes, like a theatrical stage production each segment of the ninety-minute show had to be meticulously planned and rehearsed in order to reduce the possibility of mistakes and to ensure it would fit within the network's schedule.

As *Wide Wide World* bounced across national borders, the show defined television as a technology of mobility and immediacy. The series also gave NBC an opportunity to showcase its expanding infrastructure while promoting the network itself as a kind of electronic passage to the world's infinite variety. With its focus on spectacular 'happenings' revealed from unusual (and often dangerous) perspectives, *Wide Wide World* suggested that there were specifically televisual ways of seeing the world based in part on the possibility of live remote transmission. In her book *Windowshopping*, Anne Friedburg defines a spectatorial position she calls the 'mobilized

6 Anne Friedburg, *Windowshopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 3.

7 For a discussion of the globalist rhetoric in US communication policy during the early 1960s, see Michael Curtin, 'Dynasty in drag: imagining global TV', in Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (eds), *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 245–62.

8 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 195.

virtual gaze'. She argues this spectatorial position is established in early cinema and continues to operate across different media throughout the twentieth century, including television, virtual reality and even architecture. This gaze, Friedburg explains, is a way of looking that is 'based on mobility rather than confinement' and that 'changed, in unprecedented ways, concepts of the present and the real'.⁶ I want to historicize Friedburg's important claim by showing that the NBC network played a role in constructing early television's mobile virtual gaze.

During the 1950s NBC executives imagined television not only as a domestic technology contained within the home, but as an almost ubiquitous apparatus that could generate endless access to faraway peoples, places and events. NBC executives insisted that immediacy and mobility were, and should be, the defining features of the medium, and they hailed *Wide Wide World* as one of their flagship shows. The network itself, then, had a hand in constructing television's mobilized virtual gaze, carefully embedding it within the series' design.

This early live international programme also worked to extend NBC television's economic and cultural influence by dramatizing the network's capacity to display and unify sites throughout the western hemisphere and eventually the globe. Half a decade before US political leaders seized upon Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' metaphor in their efforts to formulate new frontier communication policies, NBC TV was offering intimate visions of the 'wide wide world'.⁷ Such visions functioned as a liberal pluralist flipside to Red Scare paranoia, and they coincided with Edward Steichen's 1955 'The Family of Man' photographic exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that The Family of Man 'used photography to reproduce American values and political ascendancy as universal truths'.⁸ As I shall show, *Wide Wide World* similarly positioned US network television as the inevitable gateway to global electronic culture and intelligence.

Encoded in *Wide Wide World* is a practice I will call the 'as the earth spins' discourse of live global television – an ostentatious and imperializing mode of television production predicated upon the possibility of instantaneous access to anyplace on the planet at any moment in time. It involves navigation across continents, countries, counties and cultures, and attempts to unify disparate and dispersed elements within the same spatio-temporal frame. This 'as the earth spins' discourse shares something in common with the 'fly on the wall' logic of documentary cinema. But instead of suggesting that the filmmaker (and by extension the spectator) has such privileged access to a situation that she/he might as well be a fly on the wall, this 'as the earth spins' discourse promises that just as surely as the planet rotates on its axis, commercial US television networks can be deployed to capture and display in real time anything within it. *Wide*

Wide World's fascination with activities monitored and covered 'as the earth spins' marks it as one of the earliest manifestations of the kinds of tele-presence and mobile virtuality that have come to define global television.

Worldly television

In 1953 NBC president Pat Weaver circulated a surprisingly poetic memo to several top producers at NBC. In it, he laid out his plans for *Wide Wide World*. Inspired by 'the planet itself and everything on it', the show would air four times a year with the changing of the seasons, and it would be shot largely outdoors utilizing all of NBC's remote facilities.⁹ The programme would also have an edifying mission to reduce the gap between the mass art of television and the prosceniums of high culture. 'We will go to the great centers of culture that we have all vaguely heard about, but that have been restricted in physical location or in ease of attendance. Americans should see *The Love of Three Oranges* from the City Center. They should attend the Boston Pops. They should go to the Met and the San Francisco Opera House. A Greek play should be presented from the Greek Theater in Griffith Park,' Weaver declared.¹⁰ Two years later, in a press conference pitching his new series, Weaver claimed, 'The privileged classes pursue the better things in life'. And 'To the underprivileged who do not', *Time* reported, 'Weaver proposed to bring the www'.¹¹

Weaver's plans for *Wide Wide World* coincided with an NBC programming strategy known as Operation Frontal Lobes. As Pamela Wilson and William Boddy have explained, Operation Frontal Lobes was Weaver's initiative to elevate the cultural status of NBC and television more generally by airing programmes that reflected the network's commitment to public service, the arts and technological progress.¹² One element of Operation Frontal Lobes was the development of the 'spectacular' – the one-time, high-budget show designed to attract viewers to such events as the live transatlantic broadcast of Queen Elizabeth's coronation, or the airing of *Peter Pan*, which attracted sixty-five million viewers.¹³ NBC executives hoped such spectacles would differentiate television from film and theatre. As RCA chairman David Sarnoff warned, 'the true function of television will have failed if the film programming snowballs so as to become the dominant appeal'.¹⁴

Wide Wide World's executive producer Barry Wood insisted his new show was 'timelier than a newsreel, more entertaining than a documentary and a lot more imaginative than the dreary travelogues that have been emptying movie houses for years'.¹⁵ NBC executives developed the spectacular, then, to immerse viewers in events that unfolded on the screen in an unprecedented way. NBC president Pat

9 Pat Weaver, 'The *Wide Wide World*', circa 1953, McGarret Papers, Box 384, File 15, NBC Collection.

10 'Seeing the World', *Time*, 13 June 1955, p. 85.

11 Ibid.

12 For a more detailed discussion of NBC's Operation Frontal Lobes plan, see Pamela Wilson, 'NBC Television's Operation Frontal Lobes: cultural history and fifties program planning', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1995), pp. 83–104; William Boddy, '"Operation Frontal Lobes" versus the living room toy', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1987). See, also, Vance Kepley, Jr., 'From "Frontal Lobes" to the "Bob-and-Bob" show: NBC management and programming strategies, 1949–1965', in Tino Ballo (ed.), *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

13 Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, p. 191.

14 'The busy air', *Time*, 5 March 1956, p. 72.

15 Frank, 'Super blooper TV show', p. 145.

16 Programme Information Sheet, 'Wide Wide World', October 1955, Audience Promotion Files, 'Wide Wide World, 1955', Box 138, File 7, NBC Collection.

17 NBC Press Release, 4 December 1956, Horton Papers, Box 179, File 4, 'Awards, May-De, 1956', NBC Collection.

18 2 April 1954 letter to George Frey from Davidson Taylor, Michael Dann Papers, Box 378, File 15, 'Wide Wide World 1954-55', NBC Collection. Other potential sponsors included Owens-Corning, RCA, Texas Co., American Can, Philco, American Airlines, Greyhound, Union Carbide, GM, Ford, Dow Chemical, Metro Life, Equitable, Socony, United Airlines, TWA, Dupont, Scott Paper, General Mills, Westinghouse, Packard.

19 Pat Weaver, 'The Wide Wide World', circa 1953, McGarret Papers, Box 384, File 15, NBC Collection.

20 'America UNLIMITED via AT&T: an NBC-TV network proposal to the American Telephone and Telegraph Company', April 1955, Culligan Papers, Box 391, File 34, NBC Collection.

21 'Coast to coast', *Time*, 1 July 1955, p. 58.

22 Memo to NBC Affiliates from Pat Weaver, 26 August 1955, George Frey Papers, Box 892, File 87, NBC Collection.

Weaver declared 'television is the medium of reality . . . of immediacy, flexibility and excitement . . . it is at its best when it takes the viewer out into the world where he not only sees and hears but shares in what's happening'.¹⁶ According to the rhetoric of NBC executives, 'worldly television' would be sophisticated in its cultural tastes, participatory in its design, and expansive in its reach. It was due in part to the novelty of his ideas for *Wide Wide World* that Weaver won the Peabody Award for Radio-Television Public Service in 1956.¹⁷

After its successful premiere in the summer of 1955, NBC executives raced to find sponsors to continue the show's development for the 1955-6 season. NBC sought large corporate sponsors such as Shell, General Electric, American Airlines, Dow Chemical, AT&T, Eastman and General Motors.¹⁸ Weaver insisted that the programme was 'ideally suited for the corporations who are not trying to sell their trade-mark brands, but are trying to sell themselves'.¹⁹ Signaling the coming of public television underwriting in the 1960s, NBC executives used the term patronage to describe the sponsorship of *Wide Wide World*, for they saw it as an opportunity for a company to demonstrate its public service commitment rather than to showcase a given product. This was prestige programming, designed to represent the best potential of the medium, and thought to reflect positively on the sponsor. In its pitch to sponsors NBC characterized the show as one that would actively engage the viewers. Describing the show to AT&T, for instance, NBC executives claimed it would 'Produce a powerful sense of participation in all who watch. Joggle the lackadaisical into alert TV viewing'.²⁰ The eventual sponsorship of car manufacturer General Motors fitted neatly with the programme's constant emphasis on hemispheric travel by its audience of 'electronic sightseers'. The car manufacturer was eager to associate its new cars with a television programme one critic described as a 'cross-continental panorama'.²¹

After General Motors signed on as sponsor, Weaver dashed off a personal memo to NBC affiliates to inform them of the 'favorable criticism that poured in from the nation' after the premiere, and he requested clearance and affiliates' cooperation in publicizing the show.²² Just as the show promoted NBC's commitment to public service, it also reinforced a system of local affiliate production coordinated under the leadership of the network. Local affiliates contributed such segments as cheerleaders on the sidelines of a football game in Massalyn, Ohio, workers at a papermill in Willamette Falls, Oregon, kids and their farm animals at a 4-H contest in Pauwakee, Wisconsin, hotdog-eating fans at the Dodgers game, cowboys at a roundup in Tombstone, Arizona, and a high-school marching band in St Louis parade. The programme constructed a kaleidoscopic portrait of small-town America, bringing rural places and peoples into the flow of live network television. The

series was a big hit with local officials. *Saturday Evening Post* reported, 'One measure of *Wide Wide World*'s prestige is the co-operation it receives from civic authorities who knock themselves out to tie up with the program'.²³

Wide Wide World also functioned as a promotional vehicle for local affiliates that were otherwise invisible on national television. Local stations' call names were prominently displayed on remote vehicles and placards, and Garroway and local narrators constantly reminded NBC's audience which affiliates were sending the show's live signal. But while affiliates were involved in the show's production, NBC maintained technical control and contextualized local feeds through Garroway's narration. The result was a kind of regulated decentralization with the intent of consolidating network control over local affiliates during an era of rapid network expansion both in the US and beyond.

In addition to creating a portrait of small-town America, producers worked to elevate the cultural status of television by trespassing into the spaces of high art and culture. In one episode, for instance, we travel to the Broadway theatre and eavesdrop as Marshall Jameson directs a rehearsal of *Shangri-La*. In an episode entitled 'Star Story' we witness the balletic movement of Martha Graham in her New York studio, we hear a voice lesson by Robert Williams, and catch an improvization workshop by Sandy Meisner. In another, we travel to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where, Garroway explains, NBC had to negotiate a special arrangement to get cameras inside. 'More than 600,000 people a year' (a miniscule fraction of the number watching the NBC broadcast) we are told, come to the Met to see the 'best in visual arts by modern man'. NBC camera crews then roam through the museum capturing closeups of sculptures by Rodin and Moore, and 'masterpieces in oil' by Van Gogh, Matisse, Gauguin, Hopper, Motherwell and Picasso. The sequence is structured as a televisual slideshow of modern art, and we are constantly reminded that only through *live* television would mass audiences gain access to the rarefied and privileged space of the art museum.

Here live television is simultaneously positioned as providing unprecedented access to established cultural institutions and as an electronic form that is seemingly distinct from them. As a medium of immediacy and mobility (not just physical but cultural), television trespasses into the domains of high culture, granting furtive glimpses into events and practices that are otherwise inaccessible to most. In part, these visits to sanctified cultural institutions reflect NBC's Operation Frontal Lobes strategy – that is, to legitimate television by linking the network's possibilities of remote connection to a legacy of patronage and to the visual and dramatic arts. *Wide Wide World* positions the network in these sequences as a populist conduit to high culture, militating against an interpretation of television as massifying and stupefying. The discourses within this early

24 Memo to Promotion Manager from Raymond Johnson, 16 June 1955, Audience Promotion Files, 'Wide Wide World, 1955', Box 138, File 7, NBC Collection.

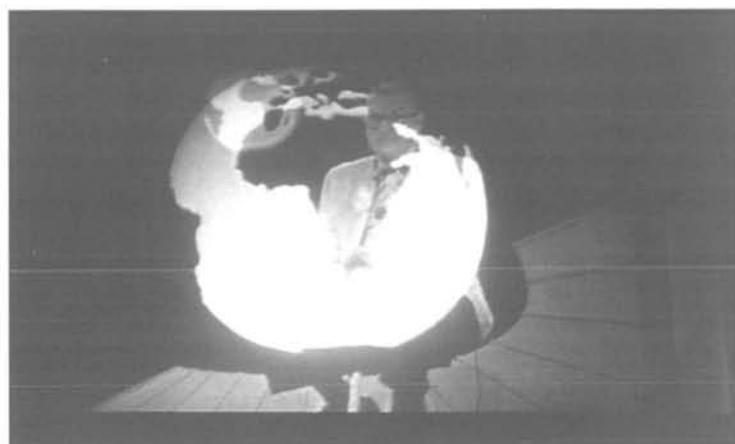
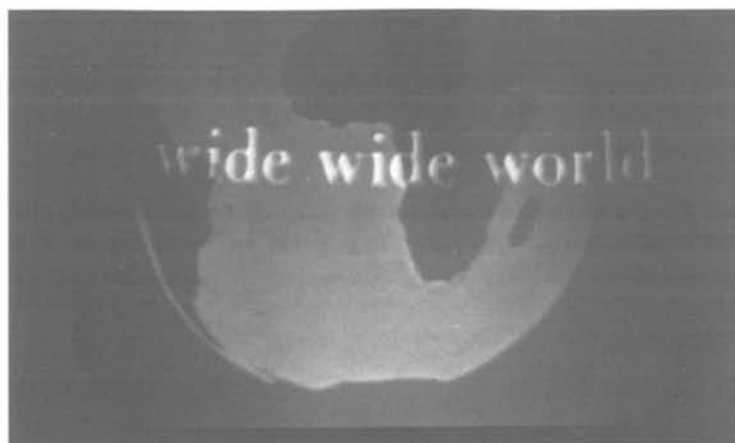
25 Robert C. Allen, 'Audience-oriented criticism', in Robert Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 117–18.

commercial television programme were ironically similar to those that led to the development of public television during the 1960s.

Always highlighting its unique cultural legacy, *Wide Wide World* relied on charismatic narration and unifying themes to stitch its segments together. Television personality Dave Garroway, of popular NBC programmes *Today* and *Home*, was the show's 'armchair guide, commentator and interpreter'. Producers ensured Garroway had 'something pithy and entertaining to say about every stop the program makes'.²⁴ While the show moved around the hemisphere, Garroway remained firmly planted at NBC's headquarters in New York. In the show's opening sequence, an image of the spinning earth dissolves into a wide-shot of Garroway perched in a swivel chair on a space-age set. Garroway is glancing back at the globe over his shoulder, and as it recedes into the background, he turns to the camera and addresses his viewers, reminding them of the technical feat of live international television (figures 1–4, overleaf). In the premiere he explains, 'You're going to get a ninety-minute slice of this beautiful world of ours through the lenses and the electronics of live television. This is a new kind of show. Our stage is the world itself. Our scenery is mostly by mother nature. Our lighting by the sun. Our cast is people, all kinds of people. There's no film on this show. We have seventy-three television cameras, 41,000 miles of telephone lines and about 1800 technicians.'

During this segment, the mobile gaze is articulated as part of television's rhetorical mode of address. As Robert Allen explains, 'Rather than pretending the viewer isn't there (as in the cinematic mode of address), the rhetorical mode simulates face to face encounter by directly addressing the viewer'. The anchor thus 'recruits people as viewers . . . persuad[ing] the actual person watching at home that he or she is the "you" to whom the addresser is speaking'.²⁵ Delicately balanced between the earth projected behind him and the studio camera in front of him Garroway's look transfers the mobile gaze to the viewer, inviting her/him to see the world through the lenses of NBC's remote cameras. Here the gaze is constructed as a set of looking relations between network anchor and viewer. This rhetorical mode of address was particularly important in early live international television because rapid leaps through time and space might have confused viewers. Narration became a means of navigation across territories, orientation in time, and translation between cultures. Garroway served as an instructive guide, educating the viewer in a new form of live televisual literacy and spectatorship, constantly reminding viewers of their location and encouraging them to keep watch lest something should escape from view. *Wide Wide World* was one of the first programmes to suggest that watching the world on live television was tantamount to participating in it.

While NBC executives developed several spectaculars during the early 1950s, *Wide Wide World* was referred to as a 'super-



Figs 1-2

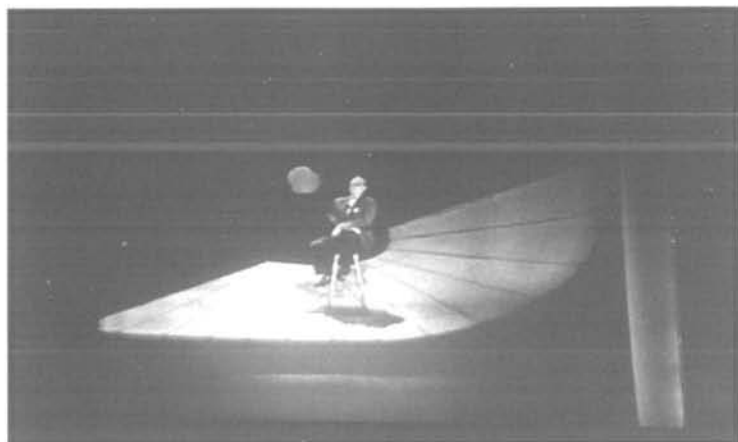
26 The programme enjoyed the most expensive on-air promotion campaign to date at the time. Programme Facts, 1954/55, 10. June 1955. Audience Promotion Files, 'Wide Wide World 1955'. Box 138. File 7. NBC Collection.

27 Advertisement, 'Tonight live television takes you to the Wide Wide World', June 1955. Audience Promotion Files, 'Wide Wide World, 1955'. Box 138. File 7. NBC Collection.

28 Advertisement, Audience Promotion Files, June 1955. 'Wide Wide World 1955'. Box 138. File 7. NBC Collection.

spectacular' because of its vast scope across the western hemisphere. NBC promoted the series as something 'brand new in television programming'.²⁶ Promotions characterized the show as an opportunity to time travel. One on-air promotion declared 'in ninety magic minutes you'll travel 32,000 miles'.²⁷ Another promised 'Forty cameras and twelve mobile units in Canada, Mexico and the United States [will] whisk you to New York, San Francisco, Stratford, Canada, Jones Beach, Tijuana, Mexico, Mount Hood, Oregon and more!'.²⁸ *Wide Wide World* was the first American television series to take viewers live to locations outside the USA. The programme roamed into the neighbouring countries of Canada, Mexico and Cuba, inviting viewers to see such events as a festival celebrating the 300th birthday of Juarez, Mexico, a baseball game and musical performance in Havana, a performance of *The Nutcracker* in Toronto, and totem pole carvings by Kwakiutl Indians in Vancouver, BC.

While these transnational connections showcased television's mobility, they also brought forth the imperialistic underpinnings of melting-pot mythology. The series was startlingly multicultural when



Figs 3-4

compared to other programmes of the same period; yet it still reinforced assimilationist discourses, drawing upon ethnic and cultural differences largely as a testament to the network's technological prowess. The series constructed the western hemisphere not just as a melting pot, but as the world itself – a global display, courtesy of NBC, that encompassed the grandeur of human diversity and culture. In some episodes *Wide Wide World* represented ethnic minorities only to reveal the 'backward' or 'primitive' aspects of their cultures, demonstrating that live television itself could help expedite 'development' and assimilation by bringing diverse peoples together within the same window of time.

One episode, for instance, takes viewers to the Intermountain School in Brigham City, Utah, a school described as the 'largest boarding school in the world' where the Bureau of Indian Affairs teaches Navajo children to become 'good Americans'. When the viewer arrives in Navajo country the local narrator explains that this '30,000 square miles of territory is nothing more than barren scrubland unable to support enough sheep to relieve the poverty of

[the] once proud tribe'. Inside the school a male instructor guides us into the living spaces of the first- and third-year girls. Peering into a room of first-year students, the instructor explains that most do not speak English when they arrive, and few have seen a toilet or shower. He notes the lack of decoration or furniture in the room and comments on the residents' inability to smile, proclaiming: 'As you can see, their hope for survival is in adapting to the world around them'. We then go to a room of third-year girls who have not only learned to keep their room clean, but also proudly display posters for Hollywood Westerns on their bedroom walls, resourcefully transform egg crates into night tables – a trick they picked up from home economics class – and quietly play cards and dominos together. 'You can see the difference right away', he says. The sequence closes with an image of Navajo students singing hymns in the school's church as the instructor assures viewers, 'We have five years in which to change the language, diet, customs – everything so that most of the youngsters will get along'. The segment not only exposes the cruel social laboratories in which Indian children were placed, it also shows how the novelty of live television was used to dramatize the rate of assimilation, suggesting that just as quickly as the *Wide Wide World* ricocheted around the hemisphere, Indian children could learn the lifestyles of western culture.

The programme featured similar segments on Basque immigrants in Central California and Hispanic Americans in El Paso, Texas. When *Wide Wide World's* cameras traveled to a Basque community sixty-five miles east of Fresno, California, Garroway declared 'the powerlines and cables of live television have reached out into this community where modern plumbing and electric light are unknown'. When NBC cameras arrived they found inhabitants in the midst of a local festival speaking 'the only tongue which bears no resemblance to any other language spoken on earth'. *Wide Wide World* brought this community into the frame of live international television only to emphasize that nothing – not even a remote immigrant community speaking the most unusual language on the planet – was beyond NBC's reach.

While some segments of *Wide Wide World* focused on the theme of assimilation when representing racial or ethnic groups, others celebrated live television's ability to provide immediate access to the 'exotic'. African-Americans, in particular, appeared on *Wide Wide World* only as performers, and in many instances the show appropriated and exoticized their musical culture. In one episode, for example, Garroway swoons, 'New Orleans has Spanish eyes. Her lips are French. She sings Negro songs. And works with Irish hands. Her heart is American. New Orleans is a woman. She is beautiful. And men still come from all over the world to enjoy her pleasures – when evening comes New Orleans wears neon and travelers come looking for fun.' The show then synthesizes these international

influences in the live performances by African-Americans Lizzie Miles, who belts out a hybrid of blues and jazz songs in French, English and Cajun, and Madame Senegal, who performs a creole dance aboard the Mississippi steamboat, *The President*.

Wide Wide World's travels to the deep South somehow managed to avoid the racial conflict thick in the air of the region, evoking instead familiar tropes of exoticism and spectacle. Here the city's multicultural and international excesses are recoded in the figure of the black woman, and the immediacy of live television is linked to her sexual availability. *Wide Wide World's* live roaming television cameras further extend the gaze of western anthropology and tourism by offering instant electronic access to the exotic, thereby reducing the threat of physical contact. (This is a strategy that would be further elaborated by later technologies such as satellite imaging and virtual reality.) For the show can only recognize international cultural influences within US territory when they are exoticized and sexualized, and therefore contained (if uncomfortably) within the white western imaginary.

In her discussion of ethnicity in early American cinema, Ella Shohat adapts the literary term 'focalization' to explore the question of 'who sees', 'who informs', and thus 'who represents' when a literal point-of-view shot is not deployed. She reconceptualizes 'focalization' to highlight 'the fact that [in Hollywood cinema] white characters become radiating "centers of consciousness" or "filters" for information, embodying dominant racial and ethnic discourses'.²⁹ As she explains, however, these centres of consciousness represent 'less individual characters than a set of specific community discourses mediating the film'.³⁰ Although *Wide Wide World* regularly featured different ethnic groups, it did so in a way that positioned the television network itself as a new centre of consciousness as its remote cameras exploited tropes of ethnic difference to generate 'world coverage'. In other words, *Wide Wide World* represented ethnic peoples only to call attention to NBC's vast reach – to dramatize the very concept of live international network television through the theme of human diversity. Rarely, if ever, did people of colour produce live segments of themselves. The phrase 'live coverage', then, should refer not only to on-location views of unfolding events, but also to the specific ways in which television networks have historically used such views to highlight their own territorial and cultural mobility and to insist upon their omnipresence.

'Views' and 'presence'

Wide Wide World was notorious for its experiments with television technology. Its cameras presented the first live transoceanic telecast to Cuba, the first glimpse of colour television, the first live image of

²⁹ Ella Shohat, 'Ethnicities-in-relation: toward a multicultural reading of American cinema', in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 1991), pp. 225–6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

earth though the window of the Goodyear blimp, and the first live television birth, to name but a few examples. One of the show's gimmicks was to offer multiple perspectives of the same live event. Television scholars often describe television spectatorship as a set of shifting 'views' as opposed to a unified gaze. As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis explains

Television breaks down the voyeuristic practices associated with cinema. But even if the position is dispersed, voyeurism remains; it increases and amplifies as its focus perpetually shifts.

Television's fractured viewing situation explodes the singular vision of cinema, offering instead numerous partial identifications not with characters but with views.³¹

31 Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, 'Psychoanalysis, film and television', in Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse*, p. 219.

Wide Wide World provides an ideal point from which to reconsider and historicize Flitterman-Lewis's claims. The show's multiple views were designed not so much to encourage partial identifications (as is the case with the subject of Flitterman-Lewis's original study, the soap opera) but rather to naturalize network television's cultural presence and economic expansion in the USA and abroad. Network executives used *Wide Wide World* to suggest that NBC and only NBC could deliver the world in such a way.

Producers regularly placed cameras in unusual places to capture rare perspectives and angles of events. In a 1957 episode called 'The Creative Spirit', for instance, viewers see Denver, 'the mile-high city' from the dangerous vantage point of the top of a skyscraper construction site. Next, they are invited to look 'through the eyes of the live TV camera at death magnified 400 times' – with the aid of a microscopic lens, we peer at cancer cells proliferating in the bodies of Ohio State prison inmates being used in medical research. The episode then takes us to an art museum in San Francisco where flautist Reginald Kell is inspired to improvisation by the surrounding artwork, and through a cage at the Columbus Zoo where Kollo, the first gorilla born in captivity, drinks from a bottle like a human baby. Finally, *Wide Wide World* accelerates to supersonic speed as an Air Force pilot thrusts viewers on the first 'TV ride across the sound barrier'.

This episode speaks not only to the wacky eclecticism of the programme's segments (all of which were intended to convey something about the creative spirit in art and science), but it also foregrounds the way in which the show worked to establish specifically televisual views captured live by remote cameras. In this episode alone, producers juxtaposed images captured through the lens of a microscope, from the top of a skyscraper and through the window of a high-speed jet. In other words, the televisual perspective shifted radically from the massive to the minute, from the ground to the air, from the static to the supersonic. As Robert Stam has suggested, the variety of views on television gives the spectator an

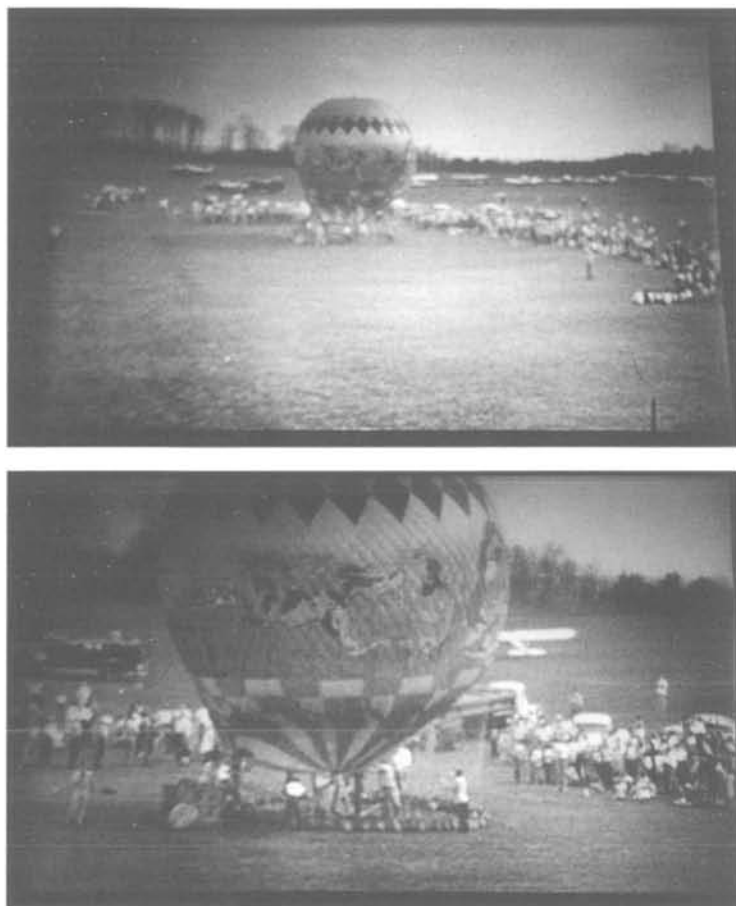
32 Robert Starr, 'Television news and its spectator', in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Regarding Television – Critical Approaches: an Anthology*, American Film Institute Monograph Series, Volume 2, (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), p. 27.

exhilarating sense of being everywhere at once. The viewer is endowed with a masterful sense of power and omnipotence.³²

Wide Wide World's stylistic signature was the establishing shot – the panoramic view of a location in which several cameras were always on call waiting to reveal the same event from different perspectives. As the show zipped from location to location, extreme long-shots revealed city skylines, wide-open frontiers, mountain peaks, limitless deserts and meandering shorelines. These panoramic vistas were typically followed by a series of graduated zooms into each location, which not only had the effect of literalizing television's movement through time and space but also ensured the viewer a front-row seat at unfolding events (figures 5–8, overleaf). One sequence featuring Palisades amusement park in New York, for example, begins with a helicopter perspective of the city skyline which gradually zooms in on the park's location. Three hand-held cameras then immerse the viewer in a dizzying crowd sequence of people eating, playing games and standing in line for rides. One camera picks John McKee, the park superintendent, out of the crowd, and Garroway interviews him about the day's happenings. After their brief exchange we arrive at the top of a steep rollercoaster ride peering over the shoulders of a man and woman in the front seat. As the ride races down the track, the image breaks up due to wireless transmission problems. Always quick to the punch, Garroway chimes, 'we can move faster than a roller coaster on live TV – you won't even have to hold your hat as we speed along the *Wide Wide World*'.

Such sequences, which combined aerial helicopter perspectives, multiple hand-held cameras and wireless remote transmission, suggested that the network's resources could be deployed to produce omniscient coverage of events instantaneously. NBC, in other words, constructed itself as ubiquitous as the culture and territory it set out to cover. Another sequence invited the viewer on a wild ride through the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas. An uninterrupted long-take moves the viewer 'down three miles of entertainment' to a hotel that's 'never closed' through the doors of its main lobby where 'things are in full swing'. Then as the camera wanders through a packed casino we encounter cocktail waitresses, roulette wheels, slot machines and crowds of gamblers. 'Excuse us please', Garroway says, as the camera eases into the Copa Room where showgirls are rehearsing. When the camera moves through another set of doors, we arrive at the pool and the camera pulls back and moves up on a crane to reveal an aerial view of the pool. We watch a diver bounce once on the high board and, as he gracefully plunges into the water, our vantage point shifts yet again and we see the completion of the dive underwater. After the camera emerges from the pool, it shows a buzzing crowd waiting for Frank Sinatra's poolside rehearsal.

These carefully choreographed sequences resemble the Steadicam



Figs 5-6

cinematography of recent primetime dramas such as *Homicide* and *ER*, which work to establish a specifically televisual style in which the camera grants the spectator a seemingly limitless ability to move through complex spaces at will. More importantly, such sequences remind us that *Wide Wide World*'s discourse of 'live coverage' was carefully structured and regulated. Not only was the show's liveness programmed within the network's schedule, it was the product of painstaking planning and coordination between network executives, local affiliates and technical crews. The practice of live television transmission as articulated in *Wide Wide World*, in other words, did not generate raw feeds of unfolding events, but rather captured dispersed yet meticulously planned events. This moment in television's early history, then, also marks the emergence of a hyperreal televisual aesthetic.³³ For in *Wide Wide World*, events were regularly presented as if they were unfolding actualities rather than carefully staged performances.

Wide Wide World's live sequences also constructed forms of televisual presence that promised to immerse the viewer within the

³³ For further discussion of television and hyperreality in contemporary reality-based television, see Kevin Glynn *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power and the Transformation of American Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 218-24.

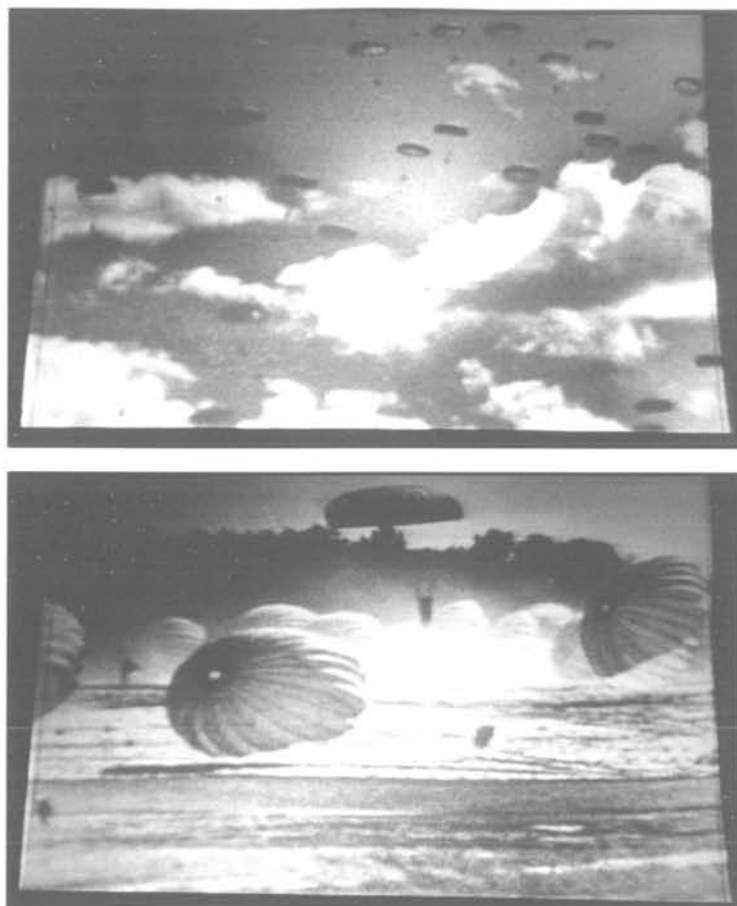


Figs 7-8

34 Kevin Robins, *Into the image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 141

field of representation. As Kevin Robins suggests, 'electronic presence' refers to the way 'the viewer is incorporated into a quasi-disembodied "meta-world" experiencing a "purely spectacular, kinetically exciting, often dizzying sense of bodily freedom"'.³⁴ What is perhaps most important is the kind of mobility afforded by the network's interlinked cameras – from broad regional perspectives to intense closeups, *Wide Wide World* asserts that through the wonders of live television, viewers can have total visual access to and knowledge of the world in the snap of a finger. The meanings of 'presence' here not only involve particular forms of spectatorial immersion, they are also bound up with the network's efforts to naturalize its own coverage of the world as ubiquitous and its views as endless.

Wide Wide World's cameras not only scanned the earth's surface for events, they brought viewers into its atmosphere, underground and underwater as well. The show suggested that NBC's access to the world was boundless. Episodes showed events in the air: paratroopers floating back to earth (figures 9–10, overleaf); an



Figs 9-10

enormous mushroom cloud forming after a simulated A-bomb explosion; helicopter views of US military installations at sea. Cameras also ventured underwater to reveal mermaid dancers performing at a Florida sea park, miles down the shaft of the Harwick coal mine in Pennsylvania to search for toxic gases, and into the depths of Carlsbad Caverns to scrutinize mysterious stalagmites. These segments marked the earth's atmosphere and its layers as instantaneously accessible to network television cameras. The series suggested television itself was synonymous with 'presence' by articulating it as part of the very materiality of earthly environments.

Wide World of NBC is a fascinating case-study of how globalism, simultaneity and omniscience were closely fitted to NBC's efforts to expand its national television network. As one promotion put it 'This new television series is a great step forward toward the goal dreamed of in the earliest days of broadcasting – to bring to the American people, and eventually the people of all countries, the challenge, the

35 NBC Promotional literature, Michael Dann Papers, 'Wide Wide World', Box 378, File 15, NRC Collection

36 Letter to Sylvester Weaver from George McGarrett, 25 September 1953, McGarrett Papers, Box 384, File 15, NBC Collection.

37 The concept of cultural capital is developed in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

38 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 2–11.

greatness, and the beauty of NBC television'.³⁵ Needless to say, the omniscience of *Wide Wide World* was necessarily partial, constrained by both social norms and technical limitations. While Weaver envisioned a global programme, the show's liveness, associate George McGarrett reminded him, would limit its scope to the USA, Canada, Mexico and parts of South America, and thus 'it would not actually be a "*Wide Wide World*" concept [but rather] more of a "This Great, Great Country – or Hemisphere" type of approach'.³⁶ This NBC series positioned the US television network at the centre of the world primed to display anything – big or small, urban or rural, routine or extraordinary – within it. In the programme's visual tour of the western hemisphere, we see some of the earliest moments in which live global television arrays a spectacle of difference for the visual pleasure of the western viewer. For international travel in *Wide Wide World* is framed not as a way of incorporating voices of peoples from other countries, but rather as part of the network's attempt to legitimate its commercial and territorial expansion.

This early television programme, much like CNN news broadcasts today, encouraged the viewer to believe that he can see and know the totality of the world in an instant of time. With its roving remote cameras and direct address narration, *Wide Wide World* offered viewers the possibility of seeing vernacular life, high art, ethnic diversity and international territories, enabling them to be anywhere – from farmhouse to fine art museum – at once. Television's ubiquity and omniscience meant that it was also linked inextricably to the production of 'worldviews' – comprehensive philosophies of human life. *Wide Wide World* introduced what might best be described as a system of 'global visual capital' – a system of social differentiation based upon viewers' access to live global media. This concept technologizes and globalizes Pierre Bourdieu's term 'cultural capital' to consider how the formation of live global media technologies has established hierarchies of social differentiation.³⁷ For in an age of technologized vision, how, what and when one sees increasingly determines one's place within a broader system of power relations. This early series structured ways of participating in the world that were organized around televisual mobility, presence and omniscience.

By suggesting that television would provide access to unfolding events, the series also dramatized a new temporal structure – one which Arjun Appadurai has called the 'global now'.³⁸ Some across the planet can access the global now of television (or the world wide web) and some cannot. We might think back, for instance, to CNN's year 2000 coverage and imagine the multitude of celebrations and peoples that it excluded simply because of their lack of connection to the infrastructure of live global media production and distribution. Television works to construct the illusion of total vision by selectively incorporating non-western cultures or ethnicized peoples, but at the same time it works to conceal seamlessly differential

39 Armand Mattelart, *Mapping World Communication* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. xi.

access to the domains of live global media. As Armand Mattelart reminds us, 'The globalization of image flows has no democratic virtue in itself; it only acquires it if individual participation is not limited to the role of voyeur of the world and its great social imbalances'.³⁹

Being present, being mobile and being omniscient is synonymous with being powerful in the world today. And to be absent in an age of global televisual presence is to be culturally and politically invisible. The practices of mobility, presence and omniscience that emerged in this early American television series established new hierarchies of power worldwide. These practices of live television have also been absorbed by other global media technologies such as satellite communication, the world wide web and virtual realities. The concept of global visual capital might be used, then, not only to explore differential access to live media at local, national and global levels, but to explore access across different media as well. Weaver's claim that *Wide Wide World* 'Takes you OUT! Takes you THERE! Puts you IN it!' could just as easily be used to describe the world wide web today. Even as *Wide Wide World* was shaping the medium of television, computer scientists were fashioning the first devices that would lead to a global internet. Some fifty years later these technologies have now converged. We need to be able to formulate critical and historical practices that encourage an understanding of the ways that presence, mobility and omniscience are articulated across media – to be mobile in the very ways we analyze the linkages between the wide wide world and the world wide web.

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Memory at a standstill: 'street-smart history' in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*

YOMI BRAESTER

¹ All quotations are modified from the English subtitles according to the Chinese original. Wang Shuo's original novella places the stress differently: 'Everything in this city is changing fast – the buildings, the streets, what people wear and talk about have all changed completely by now to become a new, by our standards a pretty elegant, city. There are no traces, everything has been stripped clean'. Wang Shuo, 'Dongwu xiongmeng' [Wild beasts], in Jiang Wen (ed.), *Danshen* [Birth] (Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1997), pp. 430–513, 430.

² The film was first shown in September 1994 at the Venice Film Festival, at which Jiang Wen won the prize for best male lead. It was subsequently screened in the PRC, accompanied by a large publicity campaign. See Wang Shuo, 'Yangguang canlan de rizi zhuyi' [Recollections of *In the Heat of the Sun*], in Jiang Wen (ed.), *Dansheng*, pp. 236–329, 129. The film was initially a PRC-Hong Kong co-production, but it

The film *Yangguang canlan de rizi*/*In the Heat of the Sun* (Jiang Wen, 1994; literal translation 'Sunny days') starts with the narrator's disclaimer of memory to the point of blurring the distinction between history and fiction:

Beijing has changed so fast. In twenty years it has changed into a modern city, and I can find almost nothing the way I remember it. Actually the change has already wrecked my memories so that I can't tell the imagined from the real.¹

In this essay I examine the dialectic between cinematic narration and historical memory in Jiang's film. Skirting an understanding of memory as either nostalgic invocation of the past or traumatic enactment, *In the Heat of the Sun* redefines memory as yet another form of myth-making. When memory fails to provide a reliable record of events, cinematic vision takes over. Jiang's work is a film about the power of cinema to reconfigure the past and aptly abounds with references to milestones of Chinese cinema.

In the Heat of the Sun soon became a cinematic milestone in its own right. Immediately after the film's release, major critics praised it as the most important work in Chinese cinema since Zhang Yimou's *Hong gaoliang*/*Red Sorghum* (1987).² *In the Heat of the Sun* resonates with Zhang's film (which brought international recognition to Jiang Wen, as the male lead) not only in reinventing cinematic language but also in retelling a key moment in China's

suffered from financial problems as the shooting neared completion. The final obstacles were overcome by the involvement of European producers, culminating with Volker Schlöndorff's assistance in gaining access to the facilities at Babelsberg. See Jiang Wen, 'Yingguang zhong de jiyi' [Memory in the sunlight], in Jiang Wen (ed.), *Dansheng*, pp. 1–86, 51. On the film's importance in the history of Chinese cinema, see critic Ni Zhen's review in Li Erwei, *Hanzi Jiang Wen* [Tough guy Jiang Wen] (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1998), p. 133. Jiang's and Wang's articles appear in a volume edited by Jiang Wen, which contains the impressions of the production crew.

- 3 *In the Heat of the Sun* alludes to *Red Sorghum* in one of the later scenes, showing the young Xiaojun crying hoarsely under blue light in a rainstorm. The image resonates with the concluding shot of *Red Sorghum*, suffused with red, where the child strikes a similar pose and cries to his dead mother.
- 4 Li Erwei, *Hanzi Jiang Wen*, p. 11.
- 5 Li Tuo, 'Xuebeng hechu?' [Where is the avalanche?], *Wenlun bao*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1989); reprinted in Yu Hua, *Shiba sui chumen yuanying* [At eighteen years old, leave home and travel far] (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1990), pp. 5–14, 12.
- 6 Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao: the Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 33.

history. Whereas *Red Sorghum* counters earlier heroic portrayals of the anti-Japanese war, *In the Heat of the Sun* revisits the Cultural Revolution through the nostalgic eyes of a man who remembers the period as the time of thrilling street fights and sexual initiation.³

Jiang's trajectory from *Red Sorghum* to *In the Heat of the Sun*, his directorial debut, is representative of the changing attitudes towards the Cultural Revolution. Born in 1963, Jiang came of age in post-Mao China. His acting career started in 1980, with an (unsuccessful) audition for the Film Academy, for which he chose a scene from the revolutionary film *Liehuo zhong yongsheng* [*Red Crag*] (1965; literal translation 'Living forever in the blazing fire').⁴ Soon after graduating from the Central Academy of Drama in 1984, Jiang played roles that debunked many of the heroic myths extolled in films such as *Red Crag*. *In the Heat of the Sun* reformulates further the collective memory of the Maoist era.

The film's apparent complacency towards the political upheavals and human suffering associated with the Cultural Revolution nevertheless contains an eloquent criticism. First, the film adds an ironic twist that becomes apparent only when the script is compared with Maoist rhetoric. *In the Heat of the Sun* is a prominent example of the now-widespread literary resistance to what Li Tuo derogatorily calls 'the Mao genre'⁵ and Geremie Barmé dubs 'Maospeak'.⁶ Phrases, gestures and symbols from the Cultural Revolution became ingrained in collective memory and were readily rehashed to refer back to that period. Maospeak, having once made tragic history, now reappears as farce, yet in doing so it has gained a critical edge. Even more scathing of the Maoist view is the way in which *In the Heat of the Sun* diverges from earlier depictions of the Cultural Revolution which have emphasized reliance on memory and especially on remembrance of its atrocities.

In the Heat of the Sun uses the cinematic combination and juxtaposition of image, sound and text to raise poignant questions about the marks left by the Cultural Revolution on contemporary China. What has persisted in one's memory of the period? How has Mao's era influenced the way in which history is being written? What other kinds of history can be presented? Can one reconstitute a true picture of the past, and how does fabulation compensate for the shortcomings of memory? And how has cultural production in late twentieth-century China been moulded by earlier texts and images?

Frozen memory

In the Heat of the Sun is set in Beijing around 1970 and follows fifteen-year-old Ma Xiaojun's adolescence. The protagonist's age is of major significance, since once he had founded the Red Guard in May 1966, Mao called upon China's youth to carry out the Cultural

7 For an account of such a youth, see Anne F. Thurston, *Enemies of the People* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 130.

Revolution. When the Red Guard span out of Mao's control and engaged in armed in-fighting as well as attacks on military units, it was disbanded in the summer of 1967. Yet the experience of high school and university students continued to be an essential part of the Cultural Revolution after the Red Guard was dissolved. Millions were sent to the countryside, either to punitive camps or to 'learn from the peasants'. Those who remained in the cities – many of them separated from their Party cadre parents who had fallen out of favour, others secure in their position as children of army officers – were left to their own devices. Children, some very young, formed gangs, fought brutally, smoked, stole and resisted all authority, even that of Mao.⁷ Ma Xiaojun (played by Xia Yu), the son of a high-ranking officer, leads such a delinquent life on the fringes of the Cultural Revolution. He and his friends rarely see their parents and their schooling is devoted to learning only 'revolutionary' subjects such as making wine. On the surface, at least, their adolescence is experienced as sunny days.

Yet these sunny days, as the opening passage warns, are as much a figment of the narrator's imagination as they are rooted in reality. Nothing is as the narrator remembers it, nor can he tell the imagined from the real. The present projects itself onto his memory and renders him incapable of knowing the past. This is illustrated in the film's most striking sequence, which prompted the title of this essay. The scene takes place at the Moscow Restaurant, as Ma Xiaojun sits next to Mi Lan (played by Ning Jing), a girl whom he has befriended and introduced to his gang. Across from Ma Xiaojun sits Liu Yiku (Geng Yue), the gang leader who is now Mi Lan's boyfriend. Xiaojun and Yiku are celebrating their birthdays, which fall on the same day. Xiaojun, obviously incensed by the bond between Liu Yiku and Mi Lan, vents his anger on the young woman, then picks a fight with Yiku. Xiaojun breaks a wine bottle and uses the sharp edge to stab Yiku repeatedly.

Until this point, some one hundred minutes into the film, the story has been told in a straightforward way and the camera-work has supported a realistic feeling. Viewers might have already forgotten the narrator's reservations about memory as expressed in the introductory passage. Then realism suddenly breaks down: Xiaojun's stabbing motions are repeated so many times that the situation starts to seem unreal, while Yiku shows no sign of pain from the attack and looks around in disbelief, as if he does not belong in the scene. It is as if Yiku has been pasted onto the set and exists on a plane where Xiaojun cannot touch him. The soundtrack is muted. Then the image freezes and the voice of the narrator, the grown-up Ma Xiaojun, explains:

Haha! . . . Don't believe any of it. I never was this brave or heroic. I kept swearing to tell the story truthfully, but no matter

how strong my wish to tell the truth, all kinds of things got in the way, and I sadly realize that I have no way to return to reality.

Memory finds itself at a standstill. The inability to capture the past – the impossibility of ever reconstructing the past as a reality – causes the narrative to grind to a halt. The narrator's goal is to tell things as they were, convey history as it actually was. He must, however, beat a hasty retreat when his vision of the past crystallizes into a still image, not a vision of reality but a resplendent cinematic mirage.

The editing renders the act of stabbing disengaged and unreal. After the freeze, the sequence is played backwards in slow motion, and the images roll back until the spilled wine returns into the bottle. Xiaojun is shown again going through the futile motions of stabbing the unaffected Yiku twenty-five times. The viewer's initial shock is transformed into disbelief. In the reverse slow motion the stabbings become more of a languorous dance than an act of violence.

The sudden turn away from violence in itself signals the narrator's reluctance to deal with the painful past. As Marston Anderson and Ann Anagnost have noted, Chinese revolutionary rhetoric has often used bodily injury to invoke a sense of reality.⁸ Violence signals the place where history hurts, and engaging in violence is tantamount, at a symbolic level, to making history. In the restaurant scene, however, the bodily injury does not materialize. Filmic devices further accentuate the immateriality of the events, as the entire sequence is retracted. The young Ma Xiaojun is stopped, as it were, by his grown-up persona, the narrator who cannot commit the story to the reality of violence. The freeze-frame draws attention to the surface, to the representative medium rather than the represented persons and remembered events. Once the affectation of the first-person narrative is revealed, the narrator's voice resumes and the viewers identify with its sceptical and ironic point of view.

The post-sublime condition

Significantly, the narrator fails to retrieve the past precisely as he is about to engage in a violent fight. In disclaiming his own narrative he explains that he could not have been 'heroic' enough to have picked a fight with Yiku. The term 'heroic' (*zhuanglie*), when used to describe a petty brawl, is not simply ironic. Understood within the context of Maoist rhetoric it reveals an ambivalence towards the Cultural Revolution, during which 'heroism' was used to refer to political and aesthetic ideals, experience as expounded in contemporary drama.

'Heroism' has often been cited as the main standard for evaluating the characters in the sanctioned productions of the Cultural Revolution, the so-called Model Plays (*yangbanxi*). Among the most

⁸ See Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 18–19; Ann Anagnost, *National Past-times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 23.

9 Mao Zedong, *Selected Works Volume III* (Beijing: Peking Foreign Languages Press, 1967), p. 82.

10 Qian Haoliang, 'Suzao gaoda de wuchanjieji yingxiong xingxiang' [Creating images of sublime proletarian heroes], *Hongqi*, vol. 8 (1967), p. 68; quoted in Lan Yang, *Chinese Fiction of the Cultural Revolution* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998), p. 29.

11 Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 204.

12 It is this resonance that brought Jiang to read Wang's novella in one night and phone Wang in the morning, waking him up by saying excitedly that he wanted to film the story, see Li Erwei, *Hanzi Jiang Wen*, p. 67.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 78–9.

'heroic' is Li Yuhe, the protagonist of *Hongdeng ji/The Red Lantern* (1963; revised 1970). Fighting against the Japanese occupation in the late 1930s, Li exemplifies the intransigence of the Communist underground. Li was moulded according to Mao's requirement that literature and art that 'ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal . . . than actual everyday life'.⁹ In direct response to Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and patron of the Model Plays, Li was portrayed so as 'to make this heroic image more prominent, more ideal, and more sublime'.¹⁰ When the narrator of *In the Heat of the Sun* explains that he 'never was this brave or heroic', he admits his failure to take the Model Plays as a model – or the Model Plays' failure to become a viable model. Either way, the narrative freezes when Xiaojun tries to come to terms with the revolutionary paragon.

The narrator's inability to cope with his lack of 'heroism' is especially poignant because youth of Xiaojun's generation aspired to be heroic and fashioned themselves as fearless fighters. Xiaojun often acts out a more heroic version of himself in front of a mirror. In one of many cinematic allusions, he shouts into an imaginary radio: 'Shoot your artillery at me', thereby imitating the hero of the war film *Yingxiong ernü/Heroic Sons and Daughters* (1964). Jiang Wen's testimony about his own youth also refers to the pervasive images of heroism. Commenting on the Red Guard's response to the rhetoric of the sublime, Ban Wang argues that the youth of the Cultural Revolution found both an object of admiration and an identity for themselves in Mao and the State, which 'because of their sublime qualities, were seen as an enlargement of [the Red Guard's] own selves. By loving these objects, they loved themselves even more.'¹¹ Ma Xiaojun's character bears a strong likeness to Jiang Wen as well as to Wang Shuo, whose novella 'Wild beasts', provided the origin for Jiang's script. Xiaojun's family, like Jiang Wen's, is from the city of Taishan; the novella's author and the film director are the same age as the fictional Xiaojun and, like him, grew up in Beijing in the idiosyncratic environment of military family housing (*budui jia shu dayuan*).¹² Jiang Wen says about his youth: 'I don't know if I believed in Marxism, but struggle, or competition, stimulated and attracted me. . . . At the time we believed what The Internationale sings about: there has been no saviour, and we cannot rely on gods or emperors. And I admired heroism and romanticism.'¹³

Although the narrator, like Jiang Wen himself, looks back on the Cultural Revolution as his heroic days, he does so from the viewpoint of post-Mao China, in which the revolutionary jargon has been discredited. The narrative breaks down not only due to Xiaojun's failure to live up to heroic standards, but also because the remembering subject, speaking from his position in the mid 1990s, can no longer identify with the Cultural Revolution's jargon and

ideals. The attempt to explain his actions in Maoist terms aptly coincides with the moment when the narrative that lays claim to absolute reality stops in its tracks.

Unspeak, memory

After the restaurant scene rewinds to its beginning, Xiaojun's story is taken in another direction. The narrator acknowledges that the need to change the storyline stems from the failure of his memory and his inability to record reality. During the freeze-frame of Xiaojun stabbing Yiku, the narrator continues to speak:

My emotions changed my memories, which have in turn played with me and betrayed me. It got me all mixed up to the point where I can't distinguish between true and false. Now I suspect that the first time I met Mi Lan was fabricated. Actually I never met her on the road. . . . I was never that familiar with Mi Lan. I never got familiar with Mi Lan. . . .

I simply don't dare think any further. I started telling the story wishing to be sincere, yet my determined efforts have turned into lying. I can't give up at this point, can I? No, no, I certainly can't. Are you going to be so heartless as to do this to me? Now I understand so well the plight of those people who make promises. It's simply impossible to be sincere.

Memory serves not to recapture the events but rather to obfuscate them, silencing the past which must be taken up by the storyteller. The narrator looks for objective history, but he must submit to fiction as the only way to retrieve the past. The resulting narrative is revised while it is being told, altered to the point where the viewers, like all readers of fiction, must suspend their disbelief when the alternative plotline resumes.

The restaurant scene informs the question posed at the beginning of this essay: namely, what kind of history is yielded by the tainted recollections of the Cultural Revolution? What comes out of that freeze-frame, the moment in which history and fiction are fused, confused, and then supposedly resolved through a reinvention of memory? The sequence of freezing time, reversing it and restarting the plot, I will argue, presents an image emblematic of the film's resistance to the Maoist vision of history.

As the reference to 'heroism' demonstrates, *In the Heat of the Sun* parodies Maoist rhetoric in complex ways. Yet before discussing other examples of dislocated Maospeak, it is important to note that arguably the most insidious way in which the film counters Maoist formulations of the past is by skirting the official history altogether. Jiang's film stands in stark contrast to other accounts of the Cultural Revolution, which have usually followed the tradition of 'telling

14 See Ji Xianlin, *Niupeng zayi* [Recollections from the cowshed] (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1998), p. 6.

15 Xiaomei Chen, 'Growing up with posters in the Maoist era', in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald (eds), *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 101–22, 103.

16 The masturbation scene was excised by censors. Jiang Wen, 'Yangguang zhong de jiyi', p. 71.

17 Li Erwei, *Hanzi Jiang Wen*, p. 75.

18 Milan Kundera describes 'Orwellizing' the recollection of one's life as the tendency to 'reducing [it] to the political aspect alone . . . as an undifferentiated block of horrors'. Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: an Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 225–6.

19 In 'Wild beasts', the narrator admits that he has aspired, without success, to be 'a real operator'. See Wang Shuo, 'Dongwu xiongmeng', p. 460.

20 Geremie Barmé notes the origin of the term *pizi wenxue* in former Beijing Film Studio head Song Chong. See Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 73. He also notes the allusion to the Maoist phrase *pizi geming*: see Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, p. 168.

21 Li Erwei, *Hanzi Jiang Wen*, p. 139; see also Director Gu Rong's similar reaction in *ibid.*, p. 135.

bitterness' (*suku*). Describing the period as 'the ten years of calamity', descriptions have focused mainly on the torture administered by the Red Guard and the painful experiences of the young people who were sent away. Such accounts provide important documentation and, as Ji Xianlin, for example, notes in his autobiography, they can hopefully prevent the recurrence of similar disasters.¹⁴ Yet these chronicles run the risk of achieving undesirable results. As Xiaomei Chen notes, survivor accounts published in English have curried favour with American neonationalists and have created a veritable genre of 'China-bashing memoirs'.¹⁵ Within China, the accounts that identify personal experience with the collective upheaval might also perpetuate the very Maoist discourse – subsuming individual will under the State – which they set out to repudiate.

In the Heat of the Sun refrains from 'telling bitterness' and depicts an adolescence graced by dream-like beauty. Political events remain at the fringes of the plot and do not seem to touch the children (the references in Wang Shuo's novella to incidents such as Mao's viewing of the Red Guard are excised from the film). The underage protagonists go through the Cultural Revolution spending their time like many of their counterparts in other places and times – bumming around, masturbating,¹⁶ and beating each other up. The director explains the film's title at face value: 'when one is seventeen or eighteen – that's the most beautiful time in one's life. One feels a fervour then, as in bright sunny days.'¹⁷ Jiang Wen does not, however, simply skirt the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution. By describing the period through Xiaojun's first love, the film avoids what Milan Kundera calls the 'Orwellizing' of life,¹⁸ that is, viewing the Cultural Revolution through the single prism of political oppression. Jiang's script follows in this sense an important feature of Wang Shuo's fiction, which has drawn much criticism for foregrounding punks (*liumang*), street-smart guys (*pizi*) and smooth operators (*wanzhu*),¹⁹ instead of the heroic characters of 'serious' literature, and has therefore been called 'street-smart literature' (*pizi wenxue*).²⁰ Jiang, for his part, had portrayed Beijing punks in films such as Xie Fei's *Benmingnian/Black Snow* (1988) and Zhang Yimou's *You hua haohao shuo/Keep Cool* (1994). As *In the Heat of the Sun* presents simple quotidian events, it reclaims the experience of the street-smart and resists the history of grand narratives. Instead of using the pathos of heroic history, Jiang Wen's film depicts Xiaojun and his generation through what I would call 'street-smart history'.

Critics have often commented on the problem of depicting a time when many people were incarcerated, exiled to the countryside and beaten to death as 'sunny days'. Huang Shixian, Professor at the Beijing Film Academy, writes: 'For many many Chinese, the summers of the 1970s were the darkest years in life, but for these pure youngsters, they were a bright sunny vacation'.²¹ Huang

²² Ibid., p. 149.

²³ Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, p. 176; Barmé, *In the Red*, p. 137.

²⁴ Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, p. 224; Barmé, *In the Red*, p. 324. Barmé notes that Wang Shuo's alternative to the CCP lingo has been rejected by the Party ideologues (*In the Red*, p. 306).

²⁵ See Yomi Braester, 'Fin-de-siècle and the dream of flying: Taipei and Beijing cinematic poetics of demolition', *Tamkang Review*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2000).

²⁶ The last scene was originally shot as a longer one, but as with the entire film, Jiang Wen had to cut it much shorter (the total length of used film for the movie amounted to 250,000 feet: see Jiang Wen, *Dansheng*, p. 30).

observes that the Cultural Revolution provided youngsters with a rush of heroism and a sense of freedom from school and other institutional control, and that seen from twenty years' distance, the narrator's imagination might delude him into seeing only the bright side of the Cultural Revolution. Taiwanese film critic Jiao Xiongping dubs the plot 'a spring utopia'.²² Geremie Barmé draws an insightful analogy between recent East-European 'totalitarian nostalgia' and what he calls the 'CultRev nostalgia' and 'retro Cultural Revolution' of the 1990s, in which category he places *In the Heat of the Sun*.²³

Yet unlike Barmé, I do not see the plot as expressing 'real and vital nostalgia' and reaffirming a 'sense of lost innocence'.²⁴ Jiang's film presents a complex version of memory, one that shows nostalgia to be tainted by one's inability to remember things as they were. In so doing, Jiang follows the pattern set by Wang Shuo's novels. It is useful to compare *In the Heat of the Sun* to another film based on a Wang Shuo plot, namely Zhou Xiaowen's *Qingchun wuhui/No Regrets About Youth* (1992). This film revolves around the relationship between a construction worker assigned to tear down an old alley and a woman who lives in one of the houses marked for demolition. The two are also linked through their past, since in the Sino-Vietnamese war the man saved the woman's life during an air raid, an incident that resulted in his loss of memory. As I have argued elsewhere, the demolition project in Zhou's film becomes emblematic of the destruction of memory and the complex processes of forgetting to which modernizing China is being subjected. In 1979 – the time at which China invaded Vietnam – Beijing witnessed the beginning of a construction drive that would drastically change its cityscape. By the late 1980s the city has been transformed into a space rapidly losing its spatial memory, an apt metaphor for the displacement of collective memories of the Maoist era.²⁵

A similar sense of forgetting is invoked at the end of *In the Heat of the Sun*, when the grown-up Ma Xiaojun (played by Jiang Wen himself) is shown as a yuppie, riding in a luxurious limousine across a new traffic junction in present-day Beijing. He tries in vain to invoke the past by exchanging words with the neighbourhood idiot, who fails to recognize him, and the film ends with the idiot's expletive at the nostalgic Xiaojun.²⁶ Against the inevitable betrayal of memory, Wang Shuo and Jiang Wen present their street-smart history. Where memory is brought to a standstill, the historian becomes a smooth operator, sliding between fact and fiction and playing one against the other.

Maospeak, Maohistory

In the Heat of the Sun calls collective memory into question by presenting an account that does not concur with the authoritative

27 A similar scene appears in the opening scene in *Zhongguo geming lishi gequ biaoyan chang* [The History of the Chinese Revolution in Song and Dance (1963)] and in the later adaptation *Dongfang hong* [The East is Red (1965)], as well as in the revolutionary opera *Hongse niangzi jun* [Red Detachment of Women (1972); an execution of revolutionaries is also a climactic moment in *Living Forever in the Blazing Fire*.

28 Jiang Yibing, 'Guanghui de yingxiong xingxiang, zhanxin de wutai meishu – xuexi geming xiandai jingju *Hongdeng ji* wutai meishu de tihui' [A brilliant heroic image, a fresh stage art: my experience of studying the stage art of the revolutionary modern Beijing opera *The Red Lantern*], *Beijing ribao*, 1 May 1970; reprinted in *Geming de hongdeng – zan geming xiandai jingju Hongdeng ji* [The red lantern of the revolution: in praise of the revolutionary modern Beijing opera *The Red Lantern*] (Hangzhou: Renmin chubanshe, 1970), pp. 145–9, 148.

29 See Tong Yun, 'Quan shijie wuchanzhe lianhe qilai – zan geming yangban xi *Hongdeng ji* zhong Li Yuhe yijia de shenhou jiejing qingyi' [Unite, proletarians of the entire world: in praise of the deep class camaraderie in Li Yuhe's family, in the revolutionary model play *The Red Lantern*], *Guangming ribao*, 5 February 1970; reprinted in *Jingtian dongdi de weida geming zhuangju* [The earth-shattering great revolutionary achievement: in praise of the revolutionary model plays] (Hong Kong: Xianggang sanlian shudian, 1970), pp. 97–105.

30 See Jiang Wen, 'Yangguang zhong de jiyi', p. 71.

31 Scene Five was performed as part of a tribute to director A Jia at the Beijing People's Theatre in 1987; see Dai Jiafang, *Yangbanxi de fengfang yuyu – Jiang Qing, Yangban xi ji neimu* [Gossip on the model plays: Jiang Qing, the model plays and the back stage] (Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe,

lingo of Maospeak nor with the official chronicles of Mao history. Yet what is at stake is not a crass political dissidence in the form of questioning the hegemony of the CCP. Instead, Jiang Wen presents an alternative order of things and redefines the linguistic and historical frames of reference that supported Mao's authority.

The film brings together the sanctioned rhetoric of heroism and the underbelly of the Cultural Revolution in powerful contrast, for example in one of the street-fighting scenes. A long sequence shows Xiaojun's gang riding their bikes to a retaliatory battle with another gang. Without waiting for the culprit to be identified, Ma Xiaojun turns on a boy said to have attacked one of his own gang, hitting him repeatedly on the head with a brick until he is covered in blood (later the witness admits that he cannot remember whether it was in fact the right person). The senseless violence acquires an additional meaning as the scene is accompanied by the music of *The Internationale*. Played at official events (and, in this case, at the end of the day's radio broadcast), the tune came to symbolize ideological rectitude. As I have already mentioned, Jiang Wen associates the song with heroism, a link which also brings to mind earlier filmic treatments of the song in revolutionary productions. In *The Red Lantern* and other pieces from the 1960s, the revolutionary characters march heroically towards their death in time to *The Internationale*.²⁷ The scene in *The Red Lantern* presents an image of unmitigated heroism, as red spotlights follow Li Yuhe to express (in the words of a contemporary critic) his 'crimson gall and red heart, boundlessly loyal to Mao Zedong'.²⁸ The boy's near-death at Xiaojun's hands, by contrast, is far from the martyrdom at the execution grounds depicted in the revolutionary plays. Whereas it was claimed that *The Red Lantern* closely followed *The Internationale* and embodied its words,²⁹ the dissonance in *In the Heat of the Sun* is startling and has in fact incensed censors, who demanded that the music be toned down.³⁰

The fight scene, as well as the many spoofs on Soviet cinema staged by Xiaojun and his friends, illustrate the difference between Jiang's film and less critical nostalgic pieces. *The Red Lantern*, for example, has enjoyed revivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s that have caused little controversy.³¹ Just as the street fight ridicules the *Internationale* and Xiaojun's fantasy mocks *Heroic Sons and Daughters*, so does the boys' re-enactment of Vasili's death in Mikhail Romm's *Lenin v 1918 godu* [Lenin in 1918 (1939)] fail to carry the original heroic tone. In the Soviet movie, Vasili risks his life and jumps from the second floor to thwart a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. When Ma Xiaojun and Liu Yiku act out the film stunt, they make a dangerous jump with no more heroic purpose in mind than to impress Mi Lan. As critic Dai Jinhua points out, such references rely on the audience's familiarity with the cinema of the 'Socialist Camp'.³² Jiang Wen uses the collective

1995], p. 3. The entire play showed for a short while in 1991. See Barmé, *In the Red*, p. 101.

32 Dai Jinhua, *Yinxing shuxie* [Invisible writing] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1999), p. 237.

33 See Barmé, *In the Red*, pp. 99–101.

34 See also lyrics translated in Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, pp. 192–4.

35 See Ji Xianlin, *Niupeng zayi*, p. 163.

memory of spectators who have seen numerous dubbed-version replays of the Soviet film to recast an audacious escape as a thoughtless prank.

In the Heat of the Sun joins the counter-culture that has engaged in rereading Marxist symbols, such as Cui Jian's 'red rock music', which introduced sarcasm even to revolutionary songs. Instead of portraying the Cultural Revolution in black and white (or rather black and red), the film partakes of the social critique which Barmé has called 'the graying of Chinese culture'.³³ Inspired by Wang Shuo's techniques of resistance, the film undoes Mao history by presenting an alternative to the rhetoric and symbolism of Mao speak.

The first salvo is fired already in the introductory passage, right after the narrator admits that he cannot distinguish reality from fiction. He continues:

My stories always take place in summer. People expose more of themselves in the heat and find it harder to conceal their desires.

It seems like it was an eternal summer then. The sun always had time to come out and accompany us. There was plenty of sunlight, too bright, washing our eyes in waves of blackness.

As I have already mentioned, the director stands by this description and equates adolescence to 'bright sunny days', thereby skirting the subjection of the personal to the national narrative. Yet the description of the period as flooded in eternal sunlight is bound to be interpreted in the light of the cult of Mao as the 'Bright Red Sun'. The unofficial anthem during the Cultural Revolution is: 'The East is red / the sun has arisen / a Mao Zedong has appeared in China'. Or, as the song in the beginning of *In the Heat of the Sun* says: 'In the raging storm of revolution / The soldiers' hearts turn towards the sun / Oh! Chairman Mao! Chairman Mao! ... / Your brilliant thoughts have nurtured us like the dew and sunlight'.³⁴ These adulatory texts were known and sung by all. The title and opening passage of the film recontextualize Mao's personality cult in terms of raw emotion and reinterpret Mao's relentless light as the scorching of memory. Moreover, the depiction of the Cultural Revolution as a period of brightness becomes ironic when one recalls that the Red Guard would at times order incarcerated 'counter-revolutionaries' to look straight at the sun for hours on end.³⁵ The consequent damage to their eyesight entailed that victims would carry forever the memory of their torture in the form of blurs and black spots. The sun literally became a vision of darkness.

A skeleton key to history

The 'street-smart history' of *In the Heat of the Sun*, replete with tongue-in-cheek Maoist references that are both nostalgic and

scathingly critical, frustrates any attempt to pin down the meaning of the Cultural Revolution. The very resistance to one-sided interpretation runs counter to Maoist rhetoric. The revolutionary operas buttressed a system that left all authority over production and interpretation in the hands of state ideologues. *The Red Lantern* in particular drives home the message by focusing on the transmission of a telegraphic code from the Party's base area to the underground. It is important that the code is an article of no signification of its own. By circumventing the ideological content of specific messages and stressing the Party's control over the code, the revolutionary opera presents a semiotic economy that defers signification indefinitely and relegates decoding and interpretation to the leaders.

In the Heat of the Sun, on the other hand, applies multiple codes to official rhetoric. It is no coincidence that Xiaojun often breaks into other people's apartments using a skeleton key (*wanneng yaoshi*). Wang Shuo's novella stresses the point:

This activity gave me strong evidence to refute a folk saying that verges on a truism: every lock has its key. In fact, with a few keys one can open many locks, and with some patience and skill, countless locks – this is the case with the skeleton key.³⁶

³⁶ Wang Shuo, 'Dongwu xiongmen', p. 434.

Xiaojun's habit is both typical of the Cultural Revolution, a period when the Red Guard invaded homes and disregarded privacy, and significantly different from it in that the boy comes and leaves surreptitiously. His character resonates not so much with Mao's 'small soldiers' as with juvenile delinquents such as Faye in Wong Kar-wai's *Chongqing senlin/Chunking Express* (1993). He does not reappropriate the spaces outright but rather dislocates their usage to another key. While his narrative displaces Maoist metaphors, his skeleton key replaces social patterns and interpretative schemes within the film. Like the totalitarian state, Xiaojun lays claim to people's private spaces, but as the above passage accentuates, the key that opens every door is also the key that refutes truisms and which no figure of speech can withstand.

The skeleton key opens for Xiaojun the doors to an alternative fantasy world, to a place that is, paradoxically, truly his own. Yet the key brings him face to face with more mysteries which he cannot resolve, more memories that are suspended between fiction and reality. The most conspicuous of these memories involves, significantly, another still image. As Xiaojun breaks into an apartment, he finds the photo of a young woman, wearing a red swimming suit. When he first sees Mi Lan he immediately recognizes her as the woman in the photo. Yet when she invites him to the apartment he sees in the same spot a similar but different picture, a black-and-white photo of Mi Lan in a white shirt. When Ma Xiaojun questions her, the young woman says that she never had herself photographed in a swimming suit. Memories cancel out one

37 The photograph sequence foreshadows the restaurant scene, as in the earlier sequence Xiaojun's vision of Mi Lan blurs into the image of another young woman. Xiaojun stumbles upon Mi Lan's photograph by looking through the wrong end of a telescope, in a moment that sums up the cinematic inversion of memory.

38 Wang Shuo, 'Dongwu xiongmeng', p. 437.

39 Ibid., p. 455.

40 Ibid., p. 437.

41 Wang Shuo, 'Yangguang canlan de rizi zhuyi', p. 127.

another, as Mi Lan is found to have such a suit, but at the restaurant – the same scene in which Xiaojun hurries to rescind – it is Mi Lan who presents Xiaojun with red swimming trunks. When the image freezes, the narrator also wonders: 'Goodness! Is Mi Lan the girl in the photo? . . . I never really knew Mi Lan.'³⁷ (Significantly, towards the film's end the frustrated Xiaojun yanks away Mi Lan's key from her ankle, trying in vain to regain control over the narrative.)

Even more than the freeze-frame at the Moscow Restaurant, Xiaojun's fickle recollection of the swimming-suit photo signals the breakdown of memory and shows how the narrator compensates for his mnemonic deficiency through fabrication. In Wang Shuo's novella, the narrator describes his reaction immediately after seeing the photo: 'In my imagination I couldn't help enlarging that standard-size photo to that of a billboard. . . . By dusk I have already lost normal reactions to the outside world. Her image grew as large as my entire field of vision, and her expression was intimidating as much as my imagination could hold.'³⁸ While the image looms large in Xiaojun's imagination, he envisions the actual woman as smaller than he finds Mi Lan to be when he first meets her in person: 'her warm, voluptuous figure hung all over me, like the sunlight under which everything shows its colour.'³⁹

The last quote betrays also how memory does not distort experience accidentally but is rather encoded through contemporary rhetoric. The infatuated Xiaojun shapes Mi Lan as a sensuous version of Mao, the object of adoration at the time. Like Mao, she is equated with sunlight, associated with red, and bigger than life. Wang Shuo's narrator admits that his imagination was conditioned by the Mao cult. He explains why the photo made a striking impression on him: 'This was the first time in my life that I saw a colour photograph of such realistic effect, other than those of the Great Leader Chairman Mao and his close comrades-in-arms'.⁴⁰ The lesson that reality is defined through Mao's effigies may serve as an antidote to unmitigated nostalgia.

In the Heat of the Sun offers itself as a way of reworking the past, of transforming the standstill of memory into a motion picture reanimated by present insight. To judge by Wang Shuo's comment on the film, the preproduction research had precisely that effect on the writer. He tells: 'My impression had been that we were all pretty, pure and healthy then [during the Cultural Revolution]. . . . Only when I saw the [period] photos did I realize that we had not been pretty but rather swarthy and emaciated; our eyes dull and dogged if not outright witless. I thought we had been pure, yet when were we pure? I couldn't find us as I had envisioned us.'⁴¹ Yet it seems that one cannot extricate one's memory from past images. Insofar as Wang Shuo and Jiang Wen are nostalgic, it is because they know that they are unable to create an idiom that is free of Maospeak and Maohistory.

In the film's last sequence, Ma Xiaojun and his friends ride in a limousine through 1990s Beijing. The scene is shot in black and white, suggesting that the present too is only a faded memory, as flat as an old photograph. It is in fact the past, embellished by fantasy, which is brighter and more real. 'Street-smart history' openly abandons reliance on memory and reinvents the past. Whereas Maoist aesthetics stressed the need for authentic revolutionary experience, *In the Heat of the Sun* redefines all experience as confabulated, the result of a biased witness's unstable memory, fixed and frozen for a short while only to be swept by the flow of events and the oncoming flood of new images.

'Worrying the note': mapping time in the gangsta film

JODI BROOKS

Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world', but also – and above all – to 'change time'.¹

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in [Louis] Armstrong's music.²

Whether it takes the form of the repetitive, circular time of Allen and Albert Hughes's *Menace II Society* (1993) or the swollen and playfully interrupted 'stoned' time of F. Gary Gray's *Friday* (1995), the contemporary gangsta film is characterized by a particular experience of time. If one of the key things at stake for the young (and the not so young) characters in these films is the attempt to occupy, harness and rupture time, from their place in the postindustrial ghetto, this struggle also choreographs the films themselves. Through the compression, loading, stretching and evacuation of time at the level of the shot itself, through editing, and

¹ Giorgio Agamben, 'Time and history: a critique of the instant and the continuum', *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Lu Heman (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 91.

² Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 11.

- 3 Jacquie Jones, 'The accusatory space', in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture*, a project by Michelle Wallace (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1992), p. 95.
- 4 Sharon Willis discusses many of these issues in the chapter entitled 'Tell the right story: Spike Lee and the politics of representative style' in her book *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1997). See also Jacquie Jones's essays 'The new ghetto aesthetic', *Wide-Angle*, vol. 13, nos 3-4 (1991), and 'The accusatory space'. Critical discussions of the 'masculinist privilege' and 'Oedipal agendas' of many of these films can also be found in Lisa Kennedy, 'The body in question', and Michelle Wallace, 'Boyz n the Hood and Jungle Fever', in Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture*.
- 5 See Valerie Smith, 'The documentary impulse in contemporary US African-American film', in Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture*.
- 6 Of course forms of documentary and gritty urban realism also characterized the classical gangster films of the 1930s, as Jonathan Munby and others have argued. These early talkies brought ethnic vernacular voices to the screen through both their characters and their leading actors. Paul Muni, James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson each came from the Lower East Side and each of these actors established his film career through ethnic gangster roles. Even the studios' attempts to counter censorship by adding a disclaimer at the start of many of these pre-Code films (claiming that the film was, in a sense, a document of an unseemly aspect of the culture) could only add to the effect of documentary realism. By invoking the spectre of censorship, the disclaimer heightened the sense of suppressed voices. And we could also add that the casting of 'real gangsters' has been central to the gangster film from D.W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig*

through its practices of quotation, the contemporary gangsta film re-maps the temporal structuring of the everyday by searing a fissure in its surface. The present is both charged and missed; both summoned as a moment of possibility and laid out as the too-late. The key struggle in these films becomes a struggle over time itself, and this struggle is not only played out at a thematic level, but infuses every element of the films – performance, mise en scene and narrative structure.

The contemporary gangsta film strode on to the screens in the late 1980s and early 1990s, heralding what has frequently been identified as a new wave of young black filmmaking. Referred to as 'gangsta films', 'hood films' or 'New Jack cinema', these films aroused considerable public interest and debate in the USA. The gangsta film quickly became a focal point for questions around black nationalism and its inscriptions of black masculinity, for discussion of the function of the ghetto in both the public imaginary and in black popular culture, and for debates about what kind of contemporary black American films are being circulated and discussed. In her essay 'The accusatory space', for instance, Jacquie Jones writes that

what has emerged in the last year's [1991] commercial Black film mirrors the prevailing tide in all of our cultural products: a unified credo espousing racial solidarity (nationalism), an appropriated Americanism (vigilantism), and a uniform sexual politic (male-dominated heterosexism).³

And this cycle of films *has* been hotly debated, as Gina Dent's 1992 edited collection *Black Popular Culture* demonstrates. Four of the essays in this volume directly address the gangsta film, with many of the other essays – and much of the transcribed critical discussion at the conference from which the publication originated – also turning to the gangsta cycle.

Much of the critical debate around gangsta or hood films has focused on their (assumed) claims to an authentic black urban experience, and the 'masculinist privilege' and Oedipal agendas that frequently characterize them.⁴ Valerie Smith has undertaken a detailed critique of this cycle of films in terms of what she has identified as their 'documentary effects',⁵ and Sharon Willis has taken up Smith's arguments and examined the ways in which these documentary effects are anchored by the role of the 'native informant' in the marketing and public discussion of much recent black American cinema (in which directors and performers are presented or read as 'authentic' representatives of a black urban ghetto). And certainly it would be hard to overlook or dismiss the force of these documentary effects and claims to authenticity in both the circulation and discussion of many gangsta films, and indeed in some of the films themselves.⁶ But to focus exclusively on the documentary effects of the contemporary gangsta film can result in

Alley (1912) to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and beyond. See Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil* (Chicago, IL and London: Chicago University Press, 1999), for a useful discussion of some of these issues.

- 7 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 85.

another set of problems, in that we can overlook the importance of intertextuality and storytelling.

My interest here is in examining some of the ways that the gangsta film simultaneously deploys and destabilizes these documentary effects. This destabilization, I would argue, is crucially tied to the ways that the gangsta film draws on or samples a range of genres and iconographies and interweaves them so that the status of the representation falls into question. Tricia Rose has argued that rap 'is not simply a linear extension of other orally based African-American traditions . . . [but] a complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology'.⁷ The gangsta film could also be understood as entailing a complex fusion of technology and African-American expressive cultures: what is fused in the gangsta film is the syncopated temporality and broken rhythm of black popular music with the temporalities of the photographic media. The gangsta film not only samples a diverse range of filmic and televisual genres. It also plays with the temporal structuring of both the filmic and photographic image and their forms of temporal arrest, producing complex filmic 'beats'. Here the form of arrest that characterizes the photograph takes the form of a suspended or elided beat, and as I will go on to argue, this is exemplified by the ways that the gangsta film slides into generic quotations as a means of stalling and/or exhausting clichés. At these points the documentary impulse is particularly problematized, and it is at these points also that these films produce some of their most dynamic engagements with both the urban ghetto and the structuring of historical experience. These two inscriptions of the technical media – the quotation of popular media texts and the play with the photograph's structuring of time – can be found, to varying degrees, across most of the films in this cycle, regardless of whether they are independent or commercial productions.

Rather than recounting the critical discussions that have taken place around gangsta films, I want to approach them from another angle – that of their workings with, and articulations of, time.

Time and affect in the gangsta film

Questions of time, memory and historical experience underlie the gangsta film in a number of ways, from its workings with genre and its structuring of story and plot duration to its uses of techniques such as slow motion and leader to jar the sense of a continuous, linear time. Time is both compressed and dilated, fractured and arrested.

Like the classical gangster film, the contemporary gangsta or hood film is characterized by a contracted plot and story duration. The stories take place over a period of days, weeks, or perhaps a few

8 It is not until the Hollywood gangster films of the 1970s – and in particular Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy – that the gangster film starts to work with longer plot and story durations. The 1970s gangster film often draws on the plot duration of the epic, and in this respect is quite different from the contemporary gangsta film.

months, but they rarely entail the lengthy plot and story durations that characterize genres such as the epic or the woman's film.⁸ Gray's hood comedy *Friday* covers a period of less than a day (with a few flashbacks), the amount of time in which one of its central protagonists has to find the money (or replace the drugs) owed to 'Big Worm', his Mr Whippy van-driving dealer. Gray's *Set It Off* (1996) takes place over a period of roughly two weeks; and the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society*, while framed by pixillated footage of the 1975 Watts uprising and a prologue which snapshots the protagonist's childhood, takes place over one summer. Certainly this contraction could be understood as serving the documentary effects which Smith has argued are central to the genre, in that contracted duration can suggest a kind of journalistic 'slice of life'. Here, however, this contraction foregrounds affect: these stories unfold in a period which is both dilated (the present is flattened out and stretched) and compressed (this present is nevertheless charged to breaking point). Even gangsta films with longer story and plot durations – such as John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and James Edward Olmos's *American Me* (1992) – are characterized by this kind of compression and dilation. The story still seems to take place in one extended instant – the dilated instant of the gangster's fall – producing both the effect and affect of a contracted plot duration in which time is telescoped. Whereas in the classical gangster film this shortened plot duration is structured around the protagonist's rise and fall, in the contemporary gangsta film there is no such rise and fall but, instead, random moments in an arrested and repetitive present. In this respect it would be more useful to argue that the contemporary gangsta film is characterized by the *effect* of a contracted story and plot duration. Missed experience is infused at the very heart of the present, for if these presents are charged, they are also marked by the 'too late'. This structuring of time is best exemplified in *Menace II Society*, and is one of the film's most remarkable, though rarely discussed, features. In *Menace II Society* time is characterized by deadening repetition, and one has the sense that even if story duration (or, for that matter, screen duration) were extended, the film's structuring of time would not alter. Time is precisely what does not move in this film, and like O'Dog's relentless viewing of the surveillance video of his shooting of the grocery store workers, each claim on the present seems to miss it, and becomes instead a reproduced and reproducible image. While the two genres closest to the contemporary gangsta film in terms of plot duration would be, significantly, the teen pic and the disaster film, in the gangsta film the story often seems to have already taken place before the opening credits are over. We are seeing something more like the repeat, the replay, or the return; positioned like witnesses, we watch the events unfold in an order which is both random and predetermined.

In *American Me*, the telescoping of duration takes place through a range of temporal mappings. *American Me* revolves around the life of Santana (Olmos), the film's central protagonist and narrator. The film begins with Santana in prison, reading what we later find out to be a letter to a woman with whom he had a brief, though significant, relationship. The story soon moves back in time, crossing to his conception through the gang rape of his mother by American soldiers during the zoot suit riots, and then to his childhood in an East Los Angeles barrio, his arrest for breaking and entering, his imprisonment at Juvenile Hall, and his adult life in prison. Most of the film takes place in the various penal institutions in which Santana spends the bulk of his life, and the film's focus on the economies of time in the prison system sets it apart from many other films in the cycle. But if *American Me* has a considerably longer story and plot duration than most gangsta films (roughly fifty years), it nevertheless stages a similar contraction of time to other films in the cycle, particularly through the way it uses voiceover narration.

Like *Menace II Society*, *American Me* is narrated by its central protagonist who takes up the position of witness to his own life at the point where he has chosen to leave gang culture and, more significantly, is marked as dead. Sharing a similar voiceover structure to Max Ophuls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Menace II Society* and *American Me* could also begin with Lisa's opening line: 'by the time you read this letter I may be dead'. In all three films the narrator is speaking from the moment of, or even after, death. This use of voiceover gives both *American Me* and *Menace II Society* a particular tense structure and temporal location, compressing duration into an explosively extended instant which is endlessly dissected into its constituent parts. Each of these films is structured through a kind of retrospective gaze in which images from the central protagonists' lives flash forth with an insistence that grants them the structure of shock experience.⁹ Narrated from the moment before a death marked as inevitable, these two films are written through by departure – the departure not only of the character through death, nor even simply of the narrator-character's departure from a previous self, but of the narrator-character's non-coincidence with each moment in which he finds himself.

This is exemplified by one of *American Me*'s most exquisite edits, a cut which moves us forward in plot time from Santana's teenage years in Juvenile Hall to his adult years at Folsom without actually moving us anywhere. Santana and his friend J.D. are shown in medium-shot in the prison grounds playing handball, the radio playing in the background. As the ball hurls towards the wall the film shifts into slow motion, then with the ball's return the film picks up speed and moves into the next decade. The two friends are still playing handball, in the same positions, in an identical ball court, in a different prison, with the radio soundtrack now playing the sounds

9 The form of flashback that we find in these films foregrounds the cinematic origins of the terms. See Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989). In *Menace II Society* and *American Me* it would seem that the stories take place in the flash itself, the shock-like and dislocating 'in-between', the disjunctive interval that moves us between two points in time. Here, however, this moment – or better, interval – is extended and flattened out.

10 See Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

of the next decade. Between the moment that the ball is hit and its return, chronological time is swallowed, leaving behind the stretched outline of its absence. In this extended instant, chronological time – the time of historicism and the structuring of time generally credited to the camera-projection apparatus – is arrested and collapses. When narrative time and apparatus time seem to regain their pace, they have been vacated, mechanized. Like a photographic flash that freezes and momentarily erases that which it blindingly illuminates, this edit sculpts what Peggy Phelan would call the ‘affective outline’ of missed experience.¹⁰ The viewer’s anticipation of the fall of the beat is both played with and thwarted. This edit inscribes a fissure in linear time which not only marks each instant as dead(ening) repetition but infects and ruins any idea of time unfolding. Santana’s voiceover narration, structuring the film in the key of remembrance, offers a form of remembrance in which each memory only traces the subject’s absence.

This kind of temporal fissure is central to the gangsta film and its complex workings with – and play with – time. It stages a kind of falling, a fissure in the unfolding of time itself, a rhythmic operation in which we are dealing not so much with the falling of the beat in terms of its *placement*, but the falling, through elision or excision, of the beat itself.

Playing with the beat

While the gangsta film has been discussed in terms of its relations to rap and hip hop culture, this has been less in terms of the relations between these films and the musical and performative structures of rap and more in terms of the place of rap *in* the films themselves. Hence mention has been made of the forms of intermedia citation and exchange between gangsta rap and the gangsta film in terms of their iconography, narratives and soundtracks, as well as the role of rap artists in acting, production and scriptwriting capacities. Clearly there would be a number of problems with referring to this cycle of films as ‘rap films’. As Jones has argued:

Unlike rap music, which can be seen as a reformulation of popular music – a synthesis and, in some instances, elevation of form and content – this new homeboy cinema does not threaten existing conventions. Instead, it exists as a modification of sensationalist Hollywood formulae . . . there is a profound dissimilarity between contemporary Black Hollywood cinema and rap music: as a phenomenon, Black Hollywood is necessarily not of its own creation.¹¹

11 Jones, ‘The new ghetto aesthetic’, p. 33.

Gangsta films cannot be considered ‘rap films’ in any simple sense. Rather than focusing on the place of rap music *in* this cycle

of films, more suggestive connections can be found by looking at the ways these films engage with rap and hip hop culture in their narrative structure (particularly in terms of their forms of repetition), their editing styles, and in their sampling of a range of genres from the classical gangster film to television news. Rhythmic play – delaying, stretching and anticipating the beat – plays a significant role in the gangsta film and can be found in the editing, in the stretching and compressing of time, and in the caesuras placed in the unfolding of an event or action. These are films in which the ‘beat’ is frequently interrupted and restarted; films in which time fractures, repeats, stretches, collapses, and in which different rhythmic structures are set against each other both across the body of the films and within particular scenes. In many ways we could read the gangsta film as polymetric, overlaying and counterpointing various structurings of time. This is not to say that all gangsta films share the same rhythmic structure, but rather that each is characterized by a kind of rhythmic play.

Gray’s *Friday*, for instance, sets various rhythmic structures against each other. Craig (Ice Cube) and Smokey (Chris Tucker) spend the bulk of the film on the front porch of Craig’s house, sitting out the day, watching the activities of the street and getting stoned. Time is swollen and heady, sculpted through the heightened sensory perception of dope. Erupting through the surface of this structuring of time are a number of slapstick routines. These fracture the regular beat of the seemingly stationary present of this everyday, introducing a different rhythm and establishing a form of counterpoint as the basis for scenic construction. The (new) rhythm to be taken up and played with in each of these sequences is often (and quite literally) introduced into the frame through the arrival or return of one of the neighbourhood characters or family members who ‘carries’ this new rhythm into the scene, introducing it before it goes on to take centre stage. Each character has his or her own rhythmic signature and musical accompaniment. The local bully Deebo, for instance, makes his entries via the off-key and off-the-beat, comically menacing, grating creak of his pushbike, establishing the syncopated beat which then stands as the basis for the comic sequences revolving around his character. Likewise Smokey’s involuntary twitches and spasms – a side-effect of an evening on angel dust – provide a prelude to his slapstick eruptions. The spasmodic gestures that characterize Smokey’s scenes begin with localized facial twitches. As these twitches begin to take hold and set the beat, they spread across his body and then across the scene, operating as a kind of gestural break beat. These slapstick sequences evolve out of small interruptions in this seemingly stationary everyday (for while duration and the everyday are central to this film, this is not the ‘nothing happens’ of Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* [1976]). Sometimes this takes place through the release of a

12 For Walter Benjamin's work on hashish and intoxication, see his essay 'Hashish in Marseilles', in Peter Demetz (ed.), *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986). See also Benjamin's other writings on hashish in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

gesture or expression across a face or body, sometimes through the juxtaposition of performance styles (as, for instance, in the exchanges between Craig and his father [John Witherspoon], in which Craig's immobile face is set against the flurry of movement and expression of Witherspoon's performance style). *Friday* – a hood comedy – works with time somewhat differently than do other hood films, and not simply because it is a comedy. Produced on a remarkably small budget and in less than a month, the film has become a cult classic and offers one of the most delirious depictions of dope perception in cinema. If time in this film becomes malleable – swelling, bifurcating and playfully interweaving references from 1970s and 1980s black popular culture – it is largely because of the way the film is structured through dope perception. Set over the period of one day, 'real time' is relentlessly giving way to dope time. As with Walter Benjamin's stoned perception in the Marseilles café (or stoned perception for any of us), time here charts its own terrains, liberating itself from a subordination to movements, objects or spaces.¹²

As a comedy rather than a mourning play, *Friday* is in many respects an exception to the gangsta film 'rule'. While *Friday's* juxtaposition of different rhythms produces a structuring of time in which a seemingly stationary everyday is constantly being ruptured by play and re-mapped as a site of storytelling and performance, the rhythmic operations of most gangsta films produce a different kind of temporal fissure. As I will go on to argue, the form of temporal fissure which underlies and structures most gangsta films is similar to that of trauma – what we could call a form of falling. This, for instance, would be the case in the edit previously discussed in *American Me*, in which the viewer's anticipation of the fall of the beat – an anticipation which the film both exploits and thwarts – provides the basis for the temporal collapse. *American Me*, like *Menace II Society* and *Set It Off*, works with the caesura: the stretched or extended pause or break.

Tragic magic: the gangsta film, trauma and the cliché

In his essay '69', filmmaker Arthur Jafa proposes a black film practice structured through the tonal principles of black musical traditions. In so doing, he also suggests a framework for reading films, turning our attention to a range of rhythmic practices possible in the moving image. In this short and evocative paper, Jafa outlines the terms in which we could conceptualize such a film practice:

how does Black popular culture or Black culture in general address Black pleasure? How do those strategies in Black music play out the rupture and repair of African-American life on the structural level? . . . What does Wesley Brown's 'tragic magic'

mean when he says, 'I played in a Bar Mitzvah band. And it was a great job until I got hit by that tragic magic, and I start playing a little bit before the beat, a little bit behind the beat. I couldn't help myself. I lost the job.' . . .

. . . How can we interrogate the medium to find a way Black movement in itself could carry, for example, the sheer tonality in Black song? And I'm not talking about the lyrics that Aretha Franklin sang. I'm talking about *how she sang them*. How do we make Black music or Black images vibrate in accordance with certain frequential values that exist in Black music? How can we analyze the tone, not the sequence of notes that Coltrane hit, *but the tone itself*, and synchronize Black visual movement with that? I mean, is this just a theoretical possibility, or is this actually something we can do?¹³

13 Arthur Jafa, '69', in Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture*, pp. 253–4.

How are we to understand this conception of the tone? Clearly it cannot simply be understood within some idea of the tone or mood of a film (though this isn't to say that it couldn't also, and at a more general level, refer to the tone of a film). It suggests a kind of rhythmic play that would tease and stretch the beat (and a rhythmic play that for Jafa would also carry cultural memory). As Jafa continues:

I'm developing an idea that I call Black visual intonation (BVI). What it consists of is the use of irregular, nontempered (nonmetronomic) camera rates and frame replication to prompt filmic movement to function in a manner that approximates Black vocal intonation. . . . Nonmetronomic camera rates, such as those employed by silent filmmakers, are transfixing precisely because they are irregular. The hand-cranked camera, for example, is a more appropriate instrument with which to create movement that replicates the tendency in Black music to 'worry the note' – to treat notes as indeterminate, inherently unstable sonic frequencies rather than the standard Western treatment of notes as fixed phenomena. *Utilizing what I term alignment patterns, which are simply a series of fixed frame replication patterns (and I have 372 at this point), the visual equivalencies of vibrato, rhythmic patterns, slurred or bent notes, and other musical effects are possible in film. You could do samba beats, reggae beats, all kinds of things. This is just a beginning for trying to talk about certain possibilities in Black cinema. (Emphasis mine)*¹⁴

14 *Ibid.*, p. 254

While Jafa isn't referring to the gangsta film here, this idea of 'worrying the note' offers a way of addressing the complex 'beats' that punctuate and characterize many of these films and that are central to their forms of temporal fissure. Jafa's worrying of the note is particularly valuable in that it not only offers a way of describing and being attentive to these 'beats', but also turns our attention to what is

'worried' or destabilized through them. As I will go on to argue, what the gangsta film worries and destabilizes is the generic cliché.

Generic quotation operates in a number of ways in the gangsta film. Many of these films make direct reference to the classical gangster film by incorporating the viewing of these films into their narratives. In Ernest Dickerson's film *Juice* (1992), Bishop's (Tupac Shakur) fall into madness is signalled by his enthusiasm for the 'top of the world' sequence in *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949). In *Menace II Society* Caine (Tyron Turner) blankly watches classical gangster films in his hospital room after being shot. These direct references tend to operate somewhat didactically: the characters make sense of their lives and their opportunities through the classical Hollywood gangster film. But this kind of direct reference is only one (and perhaps the least interesting) form of quotation deployed in the gangsta film.

Like gangsta rap more generally, the gangsta film engages in a complex sampling of the Hollywood gangster film and popular media clichés of a criminalized black youth. The forms of play and humour that underlie and characterize gangsta rap's forms of critique are, however, often overlooked; it is as if gangsta rap is read literally, but literally in all the wrong places. Robin D.G. Kelley provides a counter reading to these tendencies in his book *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional*, in which he addresses the forms of humour and hybridity which play such a key role in gangsta rap.

NWA members have even admitted that some of their recent songs were not representations of reality 'in the hood' but inspired by popular films like *Innocent Man* starring Tom Selleck, and *Tango and Cash*.¹⁵

As Kelley argues:

the assumption that rappers are merely street journalists does not allow for the playfulness and storytelling that is so central to Hip Hop specifically, and black vernacular culture more generally.¹⁶

One of the most fascinating aspects of the gangsta film is the way that it destabilizes familiar generic signs through its practices of quotation or sampling. While the 'documentary impulse' that Smith has identified is certainly central to this cycle of films, this 'impulse' also entails a form of critical play. In *American Me*, for instance, this documentary impulse is frequently complicated through the use of generic clichés and quotations from other films. To take one example, in the scene where Santana and J.D. meet with a local mafia head in an attempt to take over the drug market in East Los Angeles, the film's gritty urban realism is destabilized through a slide into Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972). The scene opens with Santana and J.D. being shown into the lounge room of the dealer's sumptuous home, but when they are led into the garden to meet with this 'godfather', we seem to have moved into a

¹⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

quotation. Ponderously inspecting his rose bushes, this godfather is so haunted by Brando's godfather that the status of the 'documentary impulse' of the scene is thrown into question. It is as if these characters have just wandered onto a set where *The Godfather* is always being played out. This form of quotation – or what I would call a form of sliding – is neither parodic nor comic but *disarming*. The slide into *The Godfather* places repetition at the core of the scene, and by extension, at the heart of the film. In their interweaving and refiguring of various representations of the urban ghetto and gang culture from television news reportage, Hollywood cinema, music video and gangsta rap, these films complicate, to varying degrees, any attempt to separate the ghetto and the figure of the gangsta from the technical media.

This form of critical play with clichés, whether they are generic clichés from the classical gangster film or televisual clichés of a criminalized black urban youth, offers a form of 'worrying the note'. The gangsta film worries the note through the mobilization and exhaustion of clichés.

On the other hand the technical media underlie the gangsta film in terms of its structurings of time and historical experience. Narrative events are haunted by repetition and by their reproducibility; time is repeatedly brought to an arrest, and the everyday in these films, characterized by both catastrophe and boredom, undermines and refuses any investment in the idea of the new as marker or enabler of 'progress'. In this respect, the temporal structuring of experience in the gangsta film is written through by the disjunctive temporality of the photographic process and its forms of temporal fissure. In *Menace II Society* and *American Me* – and even, to a degree, in *Boyz n the Hood* – time is before all else marked by repetition, the fall which has already taken place and which continues to take place. At the same time then that the gangsta film fervently locates itself in an historical present (Operation Hammer, the aftermath of the Reagan-Bush era and its decimation of inner-city resources and possibilities), this present is written through by repetition. In *Menace II Society* and *American Me*'s non-coincidence between narrating voice and narrated character, the present is marked by disjuncture: this present returns and is already past, and each scene and each shot is seared by this form of repetition.

These two inscriptions of the technical media – as quotation and as a particular structuring of time and historical experience – are brought together in the gangsta film's use of the cliché. For if the slide into the generic cliché would seem to move us outside the field of a documentary or a gritty urban realism, it also, and more significantly, seems to move us out of a sense of linear, continuous time by bringing time to an arrest. While this may seem a long way from the nonmetronomic camera movements of which Jafa speaks in his proposal of a filmic worrying of the note, the gangsta film's

17 Elissa Marder, 'Flat death: snapshots of history', *Diacritics*, vol. 22, nos 3–4 (1992), pp. 128–44.

18 Walter Benjamin, 'Karl Kraus', in Jennings et al. (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2*, p. 435.

19 Pascal Bonitzer, quoted and translated in Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 43.

summoning, suspension and repetition of clichés can also be understood as a rhythmic operation. What if we were to approach the hood film less in terms of the forms of gritty urban realism it deploys than in terms of the ways that it works with clichés? It is not simply that these films critique clichés, nor that they produce clichés (though they could also be seen as doing both); rather, they do something considerably more interesting and more complex. The gangsta film also mobilizes the cliché as a kind of arrested image and stages its exhaustion and collapse. Just as the cliché arrests language and thought in the commodity form, the cliché also arrests time in the ceaseless return of the new as the always-the-same. It is for this reason that Walter Benjamin was interested in the cliché and the empty phrase. As Elissa Marder has argued, for Benjamin, the cliché is written through by the photographic structure and operates as kind of photographic negative. It is a *negative* image.¹⁷ As Benjamin writes in his essay on Karl Kraus:

The empty phrase of the kind so relentlessly pursued by Kraus is the label that makes a thought marketable, the way flowery language, as ornament, gives a thought value to the connoisseur. But for this very reason the liberation of language has become identical with that of the empty phrase – its transformation from reproduction to productive instrument.¹⁸

By foregrounding the temporal structuring of the cliché and infusing the generic cliché with the temporality of the photographic cliché, the gangsta film suggests some of the ways that the cliché can be transformed into a 'productive instrument'.

Like other films in the cycle, F. Gary Gray's second feature *Set It Off* (1996) stages complex rhythmic 'beats' through its pacing, editing, narrative structure and articulations of an everyday. This film is frequently seen as one of the most commercial (and by implication, least 'authentic') of the recent cycle of gangsta films, and my focus on it is partly motivated by its place in, and its relation to, the cycle. While *Set It Off* has received remarkably little critical attention compared to either earlier (independent) gangsta films or, in fact, other black commercial Hollywood films, it nevertheless offers a particularly interesting mapping of time and temporal experience. *Set It Off* stages the temporal structuring of missed experience – as fissure and as a falling – through the exhaustion and fracturing of clichés.

Time and the cliché

Clichés are not called *tartes à la crème* [custard pies] for nothing. The proof of the custard pie is that someone gets it in the face. It proves itself by bursting, spreading, crumbling, dripping.¹⁹

As we approach the close of *Set It Off*, Cleo (Queen Latifah) is killed in a hail of bullets by the LAPD. Diegetic sound cuts back to a distant muted hum as she drives through the police blockade and the film moves into slow motion. As Cleo's getaway car grinds to a halt, so too, it seems, does the filmic apparatus. Blocked on all sides by cop cars and helicopters, the only space left for her to move is into or beneath the surface of the image. The sequence cuts back to an aerial long shot and Cleo seems to be swallowed up by the image, her body now barely visible in the frame. The filmic devices that are used in this sequence are by no means exceptional: slow motion is, after all, one of the most common techniques used in action sequences to spectacularize the body's movements in space and time, particularly for the 'fall' of a body. Nor is the muting of diegetic sound that remarkable: it, too, is a familiar filmic device familiar in popular cinema. Yet this generically familiar scene – the extended and spectacular death of the gangster – nevertheless stages something which is considerably less familiar in popular cinema, even when, as in this film, the figure of the classical gangster is assumed by a black lesbian. What we find in this scene is a kind of collapsing and evacuation of time as the generic cliché of the gangster's death is seemingly infinitely extended.

The scene of Cleo's demise as the traditional gangster is, of course, a reference to Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). In Penn's film, Bonnie's and Clyde's deaths are staged through various forms of arrest (the use of jump cuts, still frames, and shots filmed at different speeds) which serve to signal the characters' flashing – almost exquisite – vision of their anticipated deaths. In *Set It Off*'s quotation of this scene, Cleo finds herself being scripted into a generic cliché which is neither exquisite nor tragic but almost banally predictable. For it is not only Bonnie's and Clyde's deaths that are evoked here: this scene also summons Sonny's death in *The Godfather*, a scene that is itself a homage to Penn's film. In this respect it appears as if it is the generic cliché that is summoning Cleo into its path rather than the cliché itself being summoned or quoted. Pummeled by relentless slo-mo bullets, Cleo – unlike Bonnie, Clyde and Sonny – moves through the police blockade as if she were moving through a film set or a computer game. Knowing the script better than her cinematic predecessors she also extends the scene, rising bullet-ridden from her car and unleashing a final spray of silent gunfire. Cleo's death is oddly unplaceable in story time, both claiming and expiring a cliché, she is marked as dead before her body hits the ground.

This scene not only draws on the generic cliché of the classical gangster's demise at the hands of the police, but interweaves this cliché with another generically familiar scene, the television image of the criminalized black body. The film moves at this point between the two iconographies by intercutting shots of two other characters

into the shootout – Cleo’s girlfriend Ursula (Samantha MacLachlan) and her gundealer and friend Black Sam (Dr Dre) – both of whom are watching the shootout on television in separate locations. Each of these characters turns away from the television screen at the point where Cleo has not only fallen but becomes a familiar television image, and the film returns to the aerial shot of the scene, though now Cleo’s body is virtually invisible. Like film running off a spool, this scene seems to simply expire to the point where there is no longer anything to see but a vacated space, an arrested image.

Of course *Set It Off* is by no means the only recent Hollywood film that draws on television news-style imagery of confrontations between the police force and black urban youth. In *Set It Off* and some of the other films in the cycle, however, these television news-style images, as with those from the classical gangster film, are both mobilized and brought to an arrest, whether this be through extending and exhausting the generic cliché in screen time (as in the scene of Cleo’s death), or through arresting the image by inscribing a position for the spectator-as-witness (which I will go on to discuss). In this respect the gangsta film brings to the fore the radical temporality of the photographic process – its spatialization of time – and does so, moreover, through the moving image.

Set It Off sits on the borders of the contemporary gangsta film and diverges from some of its better-known predecessors in a number of significant respects. Revolving around four young black women in South Central Los Angeles, the film’s focus shifts away from one of the contemporary gangsta film’s central narratives – the crisis of black masculinity in the urban ghetto (a narrative which can easily slide into the crisis of the ghetto as being a crisis of black masculinity). Nor does *Set It Off* place a male-centred nuclear family as the site of hope. Unlike *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society*, *Set It Off* is not narrated from the moment of death, nor does it focus on a character’s ambivalent relationship to gang culture. Cleo, however, is the character who most lovingly embraces the figure of the classical gangster and, at the same time, delineates the impossibility of occupying the role. What the film takes from the genre, and from the cultural movement of gangsta rap more generally, is the figure of the gangsta and an articulation of crisis.

Cleo’s death is the fourth of the five central deaths which structure *Set It Off* and the second of the film’s four female protagonists. Each death is progressively extended in screen duration and dissected through familiar filmic practices and devices such as slow motion and shot/reverse-shot editing. If the film’s first death happens too fast, punctuating but nevertheless being swept along in film time, the film’s final deaths – and particularly Cleo’s – seem to arrest and collapse narrative and apparatus time.

The ‘set it off’ of the film’s title refers to both the action that will kick-start a heist and the setting off of trauma. Catastrophic events

punctuate this film from the first scene (the first shot in the film, gesturing to the Blaxploitation film, is a sign in the bank which reads 'Next in Line'). In the film's first half hour, one character becomes the witness to and addressee of a murder during a bank robbery and then loses her job; another's brother is killed by the LAPD when he is misrecognized as one of the bank robbers from the opening sequence; and another loses her child to welfare and is deemed an unfit mother when her child swallows cleaning liquid. These events follow on from each other with clockwork regularity but little causal relation. All of these events seem to take place in the fraction of an instant and with unbearable predictability. The characters are progressively located in a time that does not move and does not count. As shift-work janitors in a city office block, even their claims on public space take place after hours and in spaces that are temporarily vacated. While these events narratively serve to explain why the four women decide to start holding up banks, they also serve to place crisis at the core of the film.

'Set it off' refers above all, however, to the characters' attempts to remap time and charge themselves into it. The ways in which Cleo 'rescores' scenes for action entail one such form of remapping. With each car the women steal to undertake a heist, Cleo adds the music and sets the pace, replacing the stolen vehicle's 'shit' music with one of her own CDs. But over and above the function of music to charge and redirect the instant, *Set It Off* also produces this sense of charging time through the ways it works with duration. The women's first bank heist takes place in one uninterrupted shot in which the camera awkwardly follows their movements like an overly enthusiastic novice off-sider, always oddly out of step with the characters' movements (the characters seem to learn their movements on their feet). The scene has a slapstick element to it that has disappeared by their next job, and with their second and third robberies the full force of action film editing is mobilized and the characters become both initiators and orchestrators of the event. By the close of the film, the characters' attempts to set off time take the form of rupturing time by staging its collapse. If Cleo's death collapses narrative time by being unplaceable within it, the film's next death – that of Frankie (Vivica A. Fox) – also performs a numbing of time, in this case by extending the moment of her death through an ever expanding shot/reverse-shot structure. The sequence follows on immediately from Cleo's death and opens abruptly with Frankie frozen in the foreground of the frame, a barrage of police cars behind her. This moment is simultaneously extended and erased by the slow-motion reverse-shots of Stony (Jada Pinkett) – now the only one of the film's central protagonists still alive – being moved into the position of witness and audience as the tourist bus on which she is escaping progressively moves into centre frame. This shot, which is repeated a number of times and intercut with the shot of

Frankie, operates as a kind of horizontal wipe. As the bus progressively fills the screen, its movement across the frame brings Stony in to the centre for the shot as if pushing a blank space off screen. Whereas the traditional wipe edit seems to push or slide the previous shot off the screen, the wipe effect that we find in this sequence serves to establish a blank space in the unfolding of the event.

Set It Off could be seen as a response to a scene from the earlier film *Menace II Society*, or rather, to a moment or fragment of a scene from the earlier film. While gangsta films (*Set It Off* included) often engage in various forms of dialogue with other gangsta films, here we are dealing with something more like a haunting: *Set It Off* seems to take up a fragment of another film and unfold its possible story.

About half way through *Menace II Society*, Caine participates in his first revenge killing with O'Dog and another friend. The three teenagers pull into a drive-through takeaway, ready to hit rival gang members who had killed Caine's cousin and shot Caine in an earlier scene. Their targets are hovering around the counter, harassing the teenage sales girl who, trapped behind the iron-barred counter window, is a weary prisoner to their attentions. As the gunfire breaks out between the six men, her screams pierce the scene. Caught in the takeaway-counter cage as bloodied bodies fall in front of her, she is the only figure in the frame who is not caught up in the frenzy of movement which the first gunshot unleashes. She remains in the distant recesses of the shot, paralyzed as much by the juxtaposition of her arrested movement with the flurry of activity around her as by her physical and scenic containment. The film moves on to the next scene leaving this unnamed and unknown sales girl behind, standing in her cement cage in the middle of a moat-like car park, now littered with fallen bodies. While *Set It Off* does not directly quote this scene, this form of witnessing motivates its narrative.

The killing that opens Gray's film (a white female bank customer shot in the head in front of Frankie) and the killings that follow it in the opening sequence could be seen as setting the trajectory for the film's narrative. It is not the killing itself that becomes the focus, or even the witnessing, but rather the effects of the erasure and denial of the impact of witnessing. If the cops refuse to acknowledge the impact of the event on Frankie by naturalizing it as part of her everyday, by the close of the film Frankie has reversed the structure. Holding a gun to the same detective's head, Frankie delivers back to him his bullish question from the opening scene – 'what's the procedure when you have a gun at your head?' – before being shot by the LAPD.²⁰

Traumatic experience is central to *Set It Off*, as indeed it is to many gangsta films. Traumatic events accumulate within and across these films with numbing regularity, charting a form and concept of

²⁰ This film was oddly promoted and reviewed as a 'Thelma and Louise²'. This marketing claim misses the ways *Set It Off* plays with *Thelma and Louise* (the last sequence is of Stony driving around the coast of Mexico – the location Thelma and Louise never get to and a location which the women in *Set It Off* never mention) and it also misses the significant differences between the two stories. Whereas in *Thelma and Louise*, Louise's 'trauma' is known by the detective and this motivates his paternal attempts to protect her, in *Set It Off* Frankie's trauma motivates the detective to pursue her and to criminalize her.

- 21 See Maria P.P. Root, 'Reconstructing the impact of trauma on personality', in Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou (eds), *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals* (New York: Guildford, 1992); Laura S. Brown, 'Not outside the range: one feminist perspective on psychic trauma', in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- 22 American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, quoted in Brown, 'Not outside the range', p. 100.
- 23 And more significantly, I would argue that in a number of these films (in particular *Menace II Society* and *Boyz n the Hood*), the stalling or exhausting of the cliché that I am addressing here is rarely granted to the female characters. Instead, the female characters are arrested in the cliché (in particular the welfare mother). This is an issue which Manthia Diawara has touched on in the interview 'Homeboy cosmopolitan', *October*, no. 83 (Winter 1998).
- 24 Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and experience: introduction', in Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 4–5.
- 25 Mark Seltzer, 'Wound culture: trauma in the pathological public sphere', *October*, no. 80 (Spring 1997), p. 9.

trauma similar to Maria Root's and Laura S. Brown's concept of 'insidious trauma'.²¹ Root's and Brown's proposal of 'insidious trauma' is oriented towards challenging the medical and legal definitions of traumatic experience, arguing that the (American) psychiatric definition – 'The person has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience'²² – precludes a large range of traumatic experiences which are central to the lives of many, which often take place in the private sphere, and which are also, often, repetitive. While it is somewhat ironic to draw on feminist psychotherapy arguments about trauma to address a group of films in which masculinity generally claims centre stage and female characters tend to be allocated to the sidelines, the concept of 'insidious trauma' would seem to be particularly applicable to the structuring of the everyday in these films.²³ But whether we understand trauma here in terms of 'insidious trauma' or in terms of the more familiar concept of trauma as a unique event 'outside the range of human experience', trauma does more than occupy these films in terms of their catastrophic events. As I have argued, trauma also underlies the structuring of time in these films, in particular in terms of the ways that they produce caesuras and elisions that seem to bring time to an arrest. 'To be traumatized', writes Cathy Caruth, 'is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.'²⁴ This possession is, perhaps, above all else a possession by a particular structuring of time. An image which arrests and interrupts, the image which 'possesses' the traumatized subject is spatialized time – the spatialization of an instant which ruptures, of an event which is missed and does not cease to return. This image does not simply repeat the event in its belatedness, but repeats the traumatized subject's missing of the event, her/his immolation in it. To be possessed by an image then is also to be possessed by a particular form of repetition: the traumatized subject becomes a camera which belatedly and repeatedly takes the same photograph – the event as missed and the very missing of the event. 'Trauma is, at least in part, an extreme expression of the mimetic compulsion – a photography at the level of the subject', writes Mark Seltzer.²⁵

The gangsta cycle works with a structuring of time that is very similar to that which characterizes traumatic experience. It is not so much that it simply stages or thematizes the temporal fissure that characterizes the traumatic event. Rather, this fall or tear underlies and defines the form of experience and historical consciousness that the gangsta cycle articulates: the fissure or fall that characterizes missed experience is, in other words, the dominant form of historical experience in many gangsta films. In this respect, while one may want to take issue with many of these films in terms of their anxious heterosexism and their forms of nationalism, the forms of historical experience which they chart, however, are particularly interesting.

The form of historical experience that underlies and characterizes

the gangsta film can perhaps be best addressed by looking at the ways that this cycle of films foregrounds the connections between trauma and the photographic cliché. The cliché and traumatic experience share a number of similarities in terms of their temporal structuring – both are written through by repetition and both bring something to an arrest. We could also add that one of the most disturbing features of traumatic experience for the trauma survivor is that the image through which the event ceaselessly and belatedly returns is, in a sense, clichéd, precisely because of its form of repetition. Traumatic experience would seem to be haunted by the photographic structure. For it is not only that the photograph, like the images which return to make their demands on the survivor, is marked by an arresting of time in which time itself is nevertheless missed; the images that return, like the photograph, also arrest or stall the viewer.

The elision of the beat – central to the time signature of these films – produces a temporal collapse or breach that shares a number of similarities with the temporal structuring of missed experience. By opening a space around the beat, the claims of the latter to constitute the present through the relentless production of the new are both laid bare and thwarted. While it is easy to locate such forms of rhythmic play in music, film often seems wanting in terms of this kind of rhythmic complexity, reluctant to play with the beat and, as Ralph Ellison writes, make us ‘aware of [time’s] nodes, those points where time stands still and from which it leaps ahead’. But perhaps this is in part because of how we have come to think of film and photography, unwilling to address their relations to music and rhythm. What if we were to approach film and photography as and through music? Barthes offers us the photograph as music in *Camera Lucida* and does so most significantly through his proposal of the form of counterpoint that characterizes the punctum. For the punctum, as Time, entails a crossing or collision of two tenses: the ‘that-has-been’ and the ‘there-it-is’. ‘One could open here a long chapter’, Derrida writes in ‘The deaths of Roland Barthes’: ‘Barthes as musician’.²⁶ Such a chapter is certainly yet to be written, and while it is beyond the scope of this essay, it is nevertheless worth remembering that Barthes ‘as musician’ has given us the photograph ‘as music’. For one of the most enabling and remarkable aspects of *Camera Lucida* is that Barthes has connected rhythm to Time, the fall of the beat to questions of reference.

the only thing that I tolerate, that I like [in the photograph taken of me], is the sound of the camera. For me, the Photographer’s organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates (when the camera still has such things). I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way, as if, in the

26 Jacques Derrida, ‘The deaths of Roland Barthes’, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, in Hugh Silverman (ed.), *Philosophy and Non Philosophy, Since Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 268.

27 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Flamingo/Fontana, 1984), p. 15.

Photograph, they were the very thing – and the only thing – to which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layers of the Pose. For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches – and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanisms the living sound of the wood.²⁷

While Barthes does not return to this ‘noise of Time’ directly, *Camera Lucida* is haunted by this noise. The mechanical sounds of the camera do not merely mark time, they are Time’s cry, an apostrophe that pierces the present. Of course in this passage Barthes is discussing the Photograph from the point of view of the photographed, something which he soon moves away from as he turns to the Photograph viewed. But noise does not disappear with this move to the Photograph itself, for the that-has-been of the punctum is frequently proposed as a noise that inaudibly cries out from the Photograph. How can we understand this noise of Time in relation to film, in which the mechanical sounds of the camera, the microphone, and the projector are generally suppressed? Here we need to remember that Barthes posits this noise of Time in both audible and inaudible forms. In its audible form, it is the mechanical sounds of the camera; in its inaudible form, it is the punctum. In each instance, the inscription of the noise of Time entails a form of counterpoint.

Like Ellison and Jafa, Barthes offers us a way to listen to the image, to be attentive to the forms of rhythmic play possible in film and the photograph and the ways that they can chart and articulate a temporal structuring of experience. One of the most remarkable features of the gangsta film is the way that it manages to stage the form of arrest associated with the photographic cliché in the *cinematic* image – in the image *in time*. The gangsta film’s story seems to take place in, and through, this suspended beat, in a kind of ‘off time’ that ceaselessly returns and which spectator and character alike have to navigate. In this respect we could say that the gangsta film draws on the temporal structuring of the (photographic) cliché as a form of arrest and extends this temporal structure across the body of the film itself.

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research note:

The rise of the docusoap: the case of *Vets in Practice*

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The last decade has seen the rise of a whole raft of vets-and-pets series on British television. *Vets' School* (BBC1, 1996), which accompanied vets through the final stages of their veterinary training, was followed by *Vets in Practice* (BBC1), a series which has enjoyed very high ratings since its first airing in 1997. *Animal Hospital* (BBC1, 1995–), with the avuncular Rolf Harris cast in the role of animal-loving anchor man, has also been a ratings winner for the Corporation and has spawned a number of similar programmes, all of them centring on the care and nurture of animals. These included one-off series such as *Animal Rescuers* (ITV, 1998), which was set in a RSPCA rescue centre. *Pet Rescue* (Channel 4, 1998–) and *Wildlife SOS* (Channel 5, 1998) likewise focused on attempts to nurse sick animals back to health, whilst *Animal Police* (BBC1, 1999) again homed in on the work of the RSPCA, this time concentrating on the efforts of officials to re-house animals which had been abandoned or abused.

Whilst in some of these vets-and-pets shows there has been an attempt to raise public awareness of issues relating to animal welfare and veterinary practice, the majority of them are relatively bland in character, with a tendency to dwell on the more sentimental aspects of the animal-centred stories. There are thus heartwarming accounts

of pets pulling through operations against all the odds, or endearing tales of vets going beyond the call of duty in tending to the needs of small, furry animals.

Though these vets-and-pets series belong to the factual/documentary category, most of them employ dramatizing strategies in order to promote greater viewer involvement. The vets, the RSPCA officials and even the animals themselves assume the roles of characters in a developing drama. There are occasional echoes of fictional dramas which centre on the relationships between medical or veterinary practitioners and their patients/clients. The popular British television series of the late 1970s *All Creatures Great & Small* (BBC1, 1978–90), which was based on the stories of James Herriot and chronicled the adventures of a young vet in prewar England, might be seen as a precursor of these later shows. Other series, such as the Australian soap *A Country Practice* (Channel 7, 1981–93, Channel 10, 1994), might also be regarded as providing a pre-echo of the vet programmes which have come to the fore in the last decade.

The rise of these lightweight vet-and-pets series is closely linked to wider developments in broadcasting. In the last decade or so we have seen significant changes in factual programme provision, as those in charge of commissioning and scheduling have been driven to include a greater proportion of more accessible programming. The reasons for this change of emphasis are not difficult to discern. Today's programme-makers operate in a highly competitive multi-channel environment characterized by the continuing battle for audience share and by the need for particular types of programming to fulfil perceived scheduling needs. In general, there has been a move away from a model of broadcasting underpinned by notions of public service to one that is far more consumer-oriented. All genres of broadcasting have been affected by what some regard as a regrettable 'dumbing down' tendency, including the factual categories of documentary and current affairs.¹

In broad terms this has meant that those strands in the television schedule generally labelled 'factual programming' are less likely to contain the serious or investigative work associated with pioneers of observational documentary such as Roger Graef and Frederick Wiseman, and more likely to feature altogether lighter, less demanding forms of factual entertainment. The charge of tabloidization has been levelled particularly at the form of programming now known as the 'docusoap', of which *Vets' School* and *Vets in Practice* are good examples.

In the period between 1996 and 2000, docusoaps began to dominate the early evening schedules of the mainstream British terrestrial television networks. Though these programmes regularly garnered audiences of between eight and twelve million viewers, some critics began to voice concern that the form would sound the

¹ Jon Dovey, *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 1–27.

- 2 John Izod, Richard Kilborn and Matthew Hibberd (eds), *From Grierson to the Docu-soap: Breaking the Boundaries* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2001), pp. 111–21.
- 3 Paul Watson, 'I am like a poacher', *Dox* (Documentary Film Magazine) (October 2000), pp. 10–12.
- 4 Andrew Bethell, 'A job, some stars and a big row', *BFI Mediawatch '99*, supplement to *Sight and Sound*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1999), pp. 34–5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 6 Matthew Hibberd, Richard Kilborn, Brian McNair, Stephanie Marriott and Philip Schlesinger, *Consenting Adults?* (London: Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2000), pp. 27–45.
- 7 For more detail on these images, see Rob Reiner, *The Politics of the Police*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 138–63; Alan Clarke, "'You're nicked': TV police series and fictional representation of law and order", in Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (eds), *Come on Down: Popular Media Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: Routledge, 1992); John Allan, Sonia Livingstone and Rob Reiner, 'True lies: changing images of crime in British postwar cinema', *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1998), pp. 53–75.

death knell for traditional documentary.² The main criticism was that these new formats were inherently trivializing and that they were condemned – by the formal organizing structures to which they had to adhere – to be undemanding entertainment vehicles.³ A further criticism was that such programmes relied all too often on complicity between the filmmaker and the organizations that agreed to participate.⁴ At best this was considered to result in a blunting of a programme's critical edge. At worst it was seen to lead to the kind of programme that was little more than a publicity vehicle for the organization in question.

One of the charges most frequently levelled against docusoaps is that they concern themselves only in the most superficial sense with the organizations or professions on which they focus. The working environment (hospital, hotel, veterinary practice) provides a stage for entertainment rather than being the subject of an investigative inquiry. Docusoaps are almost always character-centred and rely primarily for their appeal on the performance of individual characters with whom members of the audience are encouraged to identify, just as with characters in a fictional soap. Docusoaps are seen to be structurally incapable of providing any sustained critical engagement with their subjects, because their principal aim is to produce a mildly diverting form of entertainment.

This is not to say that producers are deliberately hoodwinking viewers into believing that their programmes are serious investigative accounts. On the contrary, producers are very up-front about their desire to assemble a core of telegenic characters and about the narrative techniques they employ in weaving the material into an entertaining tapestry.⁵ Viewers are also conversant with the conventions being employed in this type of programming. They acknowledge that the pleasures derived from watching docusoaps are of the same order as those they experience when watching soap opera.⁶

Television representations and professional image

Media representations have always been considered important in shaping the images of professions, though some professions have been subject to rather more media scrutiny than others. The police, for example, have featured in a wide range of factual and fictional representations across both the electronic and print media.⁷

The media have always been obsessed with crime, the police and policing. This is partly because they perceive it to be one of their responsibilities to inform the public about how publicly appointed guardians of law and order are acquitting themselves, and partly because crime stories provide such a rich source of popular drama. How the police are represented in the media, however, helps to

shape public perceptions of their role, and this is of considerable importance for an organization that relies on public trust and co-operation.

Of course, one has to be careful when making this argument not to give the impression that the image of the police is primarily media-generated. As has been pointed out:

The media-constructed image of policing is ... vital for the attainment of that minimum of 'consent' which is essential for the preservation of police authority. This image does not float free of the actualities of policing, but it is not a mirror reflection of them, either. It is a refraction of the reality, constructed from it in accordance with the organisational imperatives of the media industries, the ideological frames of creative personnel and audiences, and the changing balance of political and economic forces affecting both the reality and the image of policing.⁸

In other words, images of the police are constructed and circulated from a variety of sources and as a result of diverse shaping influences. Much the same can be said for the manner in which other professions are portrayed in the media.

The medical profession, and doctors and surgeons in particular, have long been a staple diet of television drama in both the UK and the US. Just as writer G.F. Newman has argued that most television police drama is ultimately propagandist in favour of the police, so it could be argued that overall television's depiction of doctors and surgeons has been overly positive.⁹

In the UK, news reporting of recent medical cases such as the Alder Hey body parts scandal and the trial in 2000 of the serial killer Dr Harold Shipman has shaken public confidence in the profession. A Channel 4 documentary series, *Why Doctors Make Mistakes* (2000), prompted critic Mark Lawson to note:

Why Doctors Make Mistakes offers a terrifying corrective to the pro-doctor propaganda of *Casualty*, *Holby City* and Channel 4's own *ER*. Phil Day's film investigates claims (originating in America but applicable here) that, while airline passengers only have a one in three million chance of dying, those treated in hospital have a one in two hundred risk.¹⁰

In her study of media images of the nursing profession in the UK, Julia Hallam notes how particular media stereotypes sustained by the media feed back into the self-image of the profession.¹¹ Wider structural, social and economic change may eventually challenge these representations, but change is slow. In her conclusion, Hallam notes that the professional reality of modern nursing (a profession undergoing substantial change in training, practice and status) is not yet reflected in the popular media images of the profession.¹²

One of the issues to be addressed when discussing media

8 Reiner, *The Politics of the Police*, p. 139.

9 Jennifer Selway 'Police officers and gentleman', *The Observer*, 9 October 1994.

10 Mark Lawson, 'It's not looking good', *The Guardian*, 2 October 2000.

11 Julia Hallam, *Nursing the Image: Media, Culture and Professional Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000)

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 177–201.

13 David Miller, Jenny Kitzinger, Kevin Williams and Paul Beharrell, *Circuits of Communication* (London: Sage, 1999).

14 This work in part emerges from a project carried out by the Stirling Media Research Institute (SMRI) and funded by the Broadcasting Standards Commission into the nature of the public's participation in television programming. See fn. 6 of this article.

representations of a profession is that there are bound to be differences in the expectations that the various 'stakeholders' have as to how they should be represented. Broadcasters will be guided by their perceived responsibilities to the audience and, to an increasing extent, by their desire to please their commercial paymasters. Representatives of the profession under scrutiny, on the other hand, will be more concerned about such matters as who is chosen to represent them, and the accuracy with which their professional work is chronicled.

Concern about the impact that various types of media exposure have on public perception of an organization or profession has resulted, over the years, in attempts to control the image that is being projected. Nowadays most organizations (public and private) recognize the role that the media play in what has been called the 'circuit of communication'¹³ between institutions and their various publics, be they social, economic and/or political.

Like other professionals who receive high-profile coverage on television, members of the veterinary profession have been more than a little concerned about how these popular representations, exemplified by the series *Vets in Practice*, might impact upon the profession's external and internal image, on both the public esteem in which vets are held and on the profession's understanding of itself. To throw light on some of these issues we interviewed representatives of several different constituencies: those involved in the making of the *Vets in Practice* series; practising, fully qualified vets who had participated in one or more of the *Vets in Practice* programmes; trainee vets and senior academics studying at the Glasgow Vet School.¹⁴ In the following two sections we present the results of these findings.

Vets in Practice: the broadcaster's perspective

In its first airing in autumn 1997, *Vets in Practice* (VP) regularly secured audiences of between 8.5 and ten million viewers; it has returned in each subsequent year, usually for two ten-week runs. The series was built on the success of *Vets' School*, transmitted the previous year, which had focused on the lives and experiences of a group of trainee vets in their final year at vet school. Together with the BBC1 series *Airport*, which was first broadcast in Autumn 1996, *Vets' School* proved an instant ratings success (both securing audiences of more than ten million).

VP picked up where *Vets' School* left off: the new series followed the fortunes of the newly graduated vets as they gained their first experience of work in a veterinary practice. Audience figures have remained remarkably buoyant, indicating an apparently insatiable appetite for this type of character-led observational narrative. The

15 Charlotte Brunsdon, in an unpublished paper 'Lifestyling Britain: the 8–9 slot on British television' given at a research seminar at the University of Stirling in April 2000, draws attention to how this part of the early evening schedule has, in recent years, been progressively colonized by programmes devoted to lifestyle and leisure activities.

16 Interview with authors, 1999.

17 Ibid.

series has all the classic features of a docusoap in that it constantly switches between fly-on-the-wall observation of the vets as they carry out their professional duties and concern with developments in their private lives, with particular interest in their emotional entanglements

Like all television programme-makers nowadays, those responsible for *VP* are very much beholden to the primetime slot the programme occupies in the television schedule. Until the mid 1990s, this mid-evening weekday slot was considered the domain of sitcoms and soap opera, relatively undemanding viewing for an audience perceived to be in post-work relaxation mood. The discovery that docusoaps, a hybridized programming format that combines factual and fictional components, could generate large, appreciative audiences, sometimes at considerably less cost than traditional forms of dramatic fiction, led to a boom in docusoap production.¹⁵

The structuring principles of the docusoap format are, like most other forms of television programming, in part determined by scheduler-imposed requirements. In this case the demand is for a form of factual entertainment with soap-like characteristics. Each episode of the *VP* series thus has three or more interweaving storylines to bring both thematic variety and dramatic pace. Characters with whom we are encouraged increasingly to identify over a period of weeks or months are regularly foregrounded in one or more of the storylines.

The format requirements are, in other words, the major determining factor of the documentation. As the executive producer of *VP* observes:

We see ourselves as one of the true docusoaps. *Vets in Practice* is a documentary, but we do structure our material like a soap. We have actually now been going on as long as a soap. . . . The series works on two levels: one is the individual case that (the) vets are dealing with and the second is following the vets' lives developing.¹⁶

The dramatizing impulse is everywhere discernible. Assembling a central core of characters who come across well on camera and to whom an audience can relate is one important factor. Creating a series of storylines capable of holding viewers' interest on a week-by-week basis is another. This narrativizing imperative imposes certain limitations on the documentary quality of the series. As one *VP* producer observed: 'We miss out a lot of the everyday elements of the vets' job. We miss out vaccinations and boosters.'¹⁷ Some events have to be telescoped in order to fit the requirements of a particular storyline. There is a constant awareness that the show has to be relatively up-beat (partly on account of the generic requirements of docusoap and partly because of its position in the schedule). In the words of the producer cited above: 'Our responsibilities are to make sure that our boundaries don't extend the

lines of taste and decency. . . . We know we are pre-watershed, so there can't be too much blood and gore.¹⁸

Programmes like *VP* have, in other words, to maintain a somewhat precarious balance between their documentary aspirations and their status as light entertainment. The danger of them tilting in the direction of the latter is illustrated in the frequently observed tendency for certain foregrounded individuals to become celebrity performers rather than true representatives of their profession. The *VP* 'stars' are well aware that as a result of their long-term association with the *VP* series they have been manoeuvred into a role equivalent to that of a soap-opera performer. As one celebrity vet observed:

I've been directed for four years of my life. . . . I'm always used to having a director, film crew around me. Sometimes I feel a bit like a property. I think they would go to great lengths to stop me from leaving *Vets in Practice*.¹⁹

The criticism, of course, is that these purported 'representatives' assume more and more the role of collaborators in a joint project rather than documentary subjects. It is, above all, a *performance* that is required, and all the evidence suggests that it is the persona of the performer that is key to the success of a docusoap. The performer is the valuable commodity, hence the importance attached by producers to maintaining good working relations with subjects in order that they remain on side.

For some critics there are distinct dangers in this complicit relationship between producer and performing subject. Whilst celebrity performers might make occasional suggestions about, say, the development of a new storyline, all important decisions as to the shaping and presentation of the narrative are in the hands of the programme-maker. Neither the subjects themselves nor the institutions to which they belong have any effective editorial control over what is broadcast. Thus vets and trainees who participate may be shown material before it is broadcast to check for factual inaccuracies, but it is the broadcaster who maintains overall control.

With docusoaps like *VP* this may not weigh quite so heavily as in other forms of documentary, since docusoap producers generally do not have an 'investigative' agenda. The inclusion of material that is capable of 'false interpretation' is something, however, that does cause occasional concern in the veterinary profession. The sight of a trainee vet making several unsuccessful attempts to inject an animal was considered by some vets as likely to reduce the public's confidence in their ability. Others vets, however, felt that such a sequence contributed to a more realistic account of a training programme where mistakes are part of the learning process.²⁰

The other charge that *VP* producers face is that they bracket out or distort certain important aspects of veterinary practice in the interests

of 'good television'. Producers counter this charge by saying that, far from wilfully distorting events and practices, they are more concerned with demystifying a profession. As the *VP* executive producer notes:

I think we've given people new insight into the veterinary profession. Some of the older, more established vets think we are taking liberties, but I think it's good for a profession to take a look at itself through somebody else's eyes and reassess who they are.²¹

21 Ibid.

Likewise a *VP* series producer suggests that the programme performs a useful function in correcting the highly romanticized image of earlier fictional representations:

I think *VP* has probably demystified the whole veterinary profession. Once, when people thought of vets they thought of *All Creatures Great and Small*. That (programme) felt, of course, like it was from another era. It was in the countryside. What *Vets' School* and *Vets in Practice* have basically done is show the nitty-gritty of the day-to-day life of young vets training and coming up into the veterinary profession.²²

22 Ibid.

Set against what might be viewed as positive outcomes of television exposure, there is the frequently voiced concern that the value of seeing vets pursue their professional activities is compromised by the generically imposed requirement to regale us with titbits from their private lives. Programme-makers defend themselves against the charge that they are pandering to viewers' voyeuristic inclinations by saying that it is important to show the impact that professional demands can have on vets' private lives. For the most part the television vets we talked to accepted that a certain loss of privacy is part of the deal, but they also recognized that there was a fine line between feeling comfortable in the camera's presence and having their privacy invaded. As one vet we interviewed put it 'They (the programme-makers) are always gingerly pushing the boundaries of how far they can intrude'. For the vets who have acquired the status of 'star performer', the obsessional interest in every aspect of their private lives can become irksome, but the voluntary nature of their participation and the fact that they have frequently accrued considerable bargaining power as a result of their performer status has provided them with more than adequate compensation.

Vets in Practice: the view of veterinary professionals

The views expressed in the above section are those of programme-makers and of vets who have been regularly featured in the *VP* series. We also conducted a series of interviews with other members

of the veterinary profession, including a focus group of eight students from Glasgow University Vet School, one of the largest in the UK. And we trawled veterinary journals and newspapers for details of debates within the industry about media representation in general and *VP* in particular.

When *VP* began in September 1997, the programme attracted a lot of critical attention from the profession. The journal of the British Veterinary Association, *The Veterinary Record*, published a number of letters which discussed the programme's depiction of the profession. The letters praised and criticised *VP* in roughly equal numbers, as the following examples demonstrate:

SIR, – I wonder if many veterinary surgeons feel uneasy, as I do, about the embarrassing portrayal of our profession in the current television series *Vets in Practice*. Do we need to allow broadcast and exposure of that initial necessary practical learning period which young graduates go through straight after college?²³

SIR, – The general public is well used to seeing newly qualified professionals struggling with the demands of their job, and the days when veterinary surgeons were envisaged as 'demi-gods', imbued from the time of graduation with all the knowledge they would ever need, has long since gone (if it ever existed).

The series imparts a lot of useful information about responsible pet ownership, and I have had several pets presented to me as a result of owners being alerted to warning signs of illness by the programme. In my opinion, the young graduates come across as caring, dedicated and, most of all, very normal people.²⁴

The debate within the profession about media representation has continued with the continuing success of television veterinary programmes, and many vets continue to view it as something of a mixed blessing. Many vets acknowledge that there are positive aspects to the growth in factual programmes such as *VP*. As one student noted:

I think they are good programmes for the general public; and it is what the client sees and it's very nice and so there is a positive side. Everybody goes away happy and thinking 'aren't the vets great; they all mend our animals and they save lives twenty-four hours a day'. That is positive.²⁵

There is also a recognition on the part of students that programmes such as *VP* have injected some glamour into what was previously viewed as a rather conservative profession. One veterinary student commented on the positive image of the young television vets, such as Trude Mostue:

Initially, when she (Mostue) was on television I was a bit wary of her because I wasn't convinced about her clinical competence. But

23 *The Veterinary Record*,
11 October 1997.

24 *The Veterinary Record*,
18 October 1997.

25 Interview with authors, 1999.

²⁶ See Margaret Mallon, 'Women in the killing fields', *The Herald*, 28 February 2001.

she has done a lot to promote veterinary medicine as a caring profession.²⁶

Interviewees agreed that the emergence of vets programming has had the positive effect of informing the public about the work performed by vets, even if they disagreed with the programme-makers' argument that television has helped to 'demystify' the veterinary profession. As a senior vet argued:

I think it has made people much more aware of the veterinary profession and that, probably, is no bad thing. Without doubt, you will learn more about any profession that has had sustained television coverage over the years through watching those programmes. I don't know whether I would use the term 'demystify', but I think it makes people more knowledgeable about the activities of professions.²⁷

²⁷ Interview with authors, 2001.

There was also recognition among senior academics that programmes could have a beneficial impact on the amount of knowledge acquired by students before they started university:

A lot of them (students) will be more knowledgeable about animal welfare and care of small animals and, simultaneously, anti-hunting and anti-blood sports. I think that sort of mix has changed as well, whereas maybe twenty years ago there would be people who would be much less aware of small animal welfare and much more into hunting, shooting, fishing because they came from a different background.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid.

Interviewees understood that programme-makers were unable to present all aspects of veterinary work because of the constraints in the production process. They recognized that given the entertainment priorities of the programmes in question, certain types of veterinary activity will rarely be included. As one student argued: 'It's glamourized on television – people don't realize all the nights you spend on call. A lot of the job is really quite mundane.'²⁹

²⁹ Interviewed in Mallon, 'The killing fields'.

The pre-watershed (9 pm) transmission of *VP* also restricts the type of footage that can be shown. As one senior vet noted:

They don't look at slaughter techniques in abattoirs which vets are responsible for, or meat inspection to ensure safety of human health. It doesn't make good TV because it's not pleasant. Nobody wants to see animals being lined up and slaughtered; but that process is often supervised by vets and can form a part of some veterinary surgeon's activities.³⁰

³⁰ Interview with authors, 2001.

And while there is a predilection in *VP* for storylines featuring small animals and pets, there will only seldom be one that focuses on large farm animals. Likewise, only rarely does one hear any information relating to animal husbandry. By ignoring certain activities,

programme-makers are arguably encouraging a distorted idea of the profession, especially among people who might aspire to become vets. In an article written in 2001, a female student explains the problems she faces as a trainee vet, pointing to the difficulties confronting women in the profession and to the new economic realities of the farming industry, topics rarely covered by the softer forms of factual programmes:

It can be intimidating if you are a woman – especially a young and very small woman like me – and have to go out to meet a farmer on his land. A lot of farm work can be physically demanding, although farmers will often take pity on you and help you out with some of the more back-breaking work. I used to devour James Herriot's books when I was a child, but James's funny stories about going out to treat a single cow in trouble no longer paint an accurate picture. The economics of modern farming means that a farmer will have you put an animal down rather than incur the expense of nursing it back to health. One of the reasons I don't like farm calls is that it's often to put an animal down rather than treat it.³¹

31 Interviewed in Mallon, 'The killing fields'.

Our interviewees were equally able to give examples of challenges facing the veterinary profession which are largely ignored in television programmes. One such challenge is that of 'omni-competence', which one senior vet argued:

... is a millstone around our necks. Vets are meant to be able to deal with all species and virtually anything that happens to that species, and that's written into the oath we take. You can't say 'I'm a horse vet, I'm a small animal vet or I'm a snake vet'. You are meant to be able to deal with all species and yet no-one would expect that of a doctor.³²

32 Interview with authors, 2001.

Many vets argue, therefore, that there are negative consequences for the profession in the way programme-makers focus on certain aspects of veterinary life:

Now, because of all the TV hype, we're getting a small percentage of people applying to vets school who are not truly motivated to do veterinary medicine. They see it on the TV; they see it as a glamorous profession, and they are also encouraged by the fact that it's difficult to get into. So they see it as a challenge to get into veterinary medicine, and I think that is a worry.³³

33 Interview with authors, 2001.

In particular, many of our interviewees were aware that the guiding principle in the selection and shaping of material on television is the need to produce easily digestible entertainment, and that the vets featured in the *VP* series are in effect being called on to act out a televisual role rather than be professional representatives. As one student argued:

I think the vets in these programmes have become more like actors being directed by programme-makers to make entertainment rather than be the subjects of a documentary. . . . I think that is probably the crux of the problem.³⁴

Members of our focus group were clearly of the opinion that long-term involvement in such an enterprise as *VP* can result in some of these high-profile performers 'going native': that is, becoming television performers first and veterinary professionals second. On the other hand, the knowledge that today's television viewers have of the conventions and imperatives that operate in all forms of television production makes it less likely that they will take the picture that emerges from these series as a comprehensive account of veterinary practice at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The programmes may contribute to people's views of vets, but a broader picture emerges as people also note media reports about BSE, classical swine fever or the foot-and-mouth crisis, about the parlous state of agricultural markets or changes in the arrangements for the importing and exporting of live animals.

Likewise, there was general agreement among vets that television has too often been blamed for structural developments in the profession that actually predate the rise of docusoaps and other factual strands of programming. In the past fifty years, the veterinary industry has undergone a process of rapid change and development. Changes in the rural economy have seen a shift from cattle farming to arable farming. The rapid development of small animal practices has also contributed to the decline in the numbers of vets undertaking large animal work. The increasing proportion of women veterinary surgeons has ended male domination in many parts of the industry. The postwar period thus saw major changes in the veterinary profession, which had nothing to do with television coverage. A Manpower Survey, commissioned by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons,

paints a very different picture from the male-dominated, mixed practice portrayed by James Herriot more than half a century ago. In those days, 'cats and dogs' practice was almost an afterthought and most farmers and horse owners did not believe women were physically capable of dealing with large animals.³⁵

35 Carried in the *The Veterinary Record*, 13 February 1999, p. 161.

As one senior vet commented to us:

I do hear people in my field criticizing recent graduates saying, 'all these women are coming into the industry who've been watching all these television programmes'. I think that the increase in women in the profession predates all the television stuff.³⁶

36 Interview with authors, 2001.

Some interviewees did argue, however, that while media portrayals of the profession reflect pre-existing trends, changing representations

do have an impact on the profession's self image. As one vet, who qualified in the 1980s, argued:

I was applying for Vets School and I remember people then used to say that vets are changing and it's all because of the James Herriot programmes.³⁷

Among students there was general agreement that television programmes – both factual and fictional strands – were having a marked influence on public understanding of professions and on recruitment to them.

You've got *Ally McBeal* for lawyers, *ER* for doctors, and you've got *Vets in Practice* for vets. Suddenly there's this big public awareness and the competition goes up.³⁸

There was also evidence that media exposure of the veterinary industry had fed into policy debates within the profession. The incorporation into university syllabuses of communication skills modules, and a renewed emphasis on Continued Professional Training, reflect a greater awareness of the profession's public image. Once again, many interviewees argued that these developments predated *VP*, but it can be reasonably argued that these measures have been adopted as a response, in part, to the growing role that the media play in representing the veterinary profession. As one vet argued:

I think that one thing we're very keen on is introducing things like communication skills so that our graduates are able to communicate well with clients, deal with minor squabbles when they are minor, and that kind of thing. Again, this has been developed over the past ten to twenty years, so I don't think it's been a knee-jerk reaction on the part of Vet Schools as a result of media exposure. I think there is a true acceptance that communication skills are important.³⁹

Conclusion

There is a certain irony to the fact that during the period in which vets-and-pets series have created an image of vets as carers, rescuers and healers, the 'harder' genres of news and current affairs have covered veterinary business rather differently.

As we write, for example (in May 2001), vets are playing a major role in attempts to contain the foot-and-mouth epidemic by systematic sheep and cattle culling. Such is the strain that the slaughter of animals is putting on the veterinary profession that many final-year vet school students have volunteered and been enlisted to help in the battle to eradicate the disease.⁴⁰ As images of slaughtered

37 Ibid.

38 Interview with authors, 1999.

39 Interview with authors, 2001.

40 See Stephen Farrar, 'Student vets join Maff on front line', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 23 March 2001.

animals become a staple ingredient of British television news, one might legitimately expect there to be some attempt to provide an account of how veterinary personnel have coped with the emotional and psychological traumas of being involved in this desperate exercise. This would go at least some way to correct the image of veterinary practice which the softer docusoap series may help to perpetuate. As one Scottish observer commented as she watched vets slaughtering cattle on a foot-and-mouth-affected farm:

Reality is both more mundane and more gruesome than the docusoaps portray it for [these] vets. . . . With their masked faces grimy with sweat and soot from the fires of the killing fields, the vets involved in the foot-and-mouth crisis are a far cry from the smiling television vets in pristine white coats treating kittens and rabbits.⁴¹

41 Mallon, 'The killing fields'.

Likewise the role of senior vets as key advisors to government on culling *versus* inoculation has brought uncomfortable reminders of the bureaucratic function that vets are nowadays required to fulfil.

All this does not alter the fact that professions will, through a variety of means, attempt to exert some influence on how their members are represented on television. This may involve resisting the initial overtures of a television company wanting to make a programme (not all vet schools have been willing to grant access to documentary filmmakers). It might also involve attempting to persuade aspiring programme producers to broaden the range of programming in which vets are represented. Of course, as with all television programmes, docusoaps offer a partial view of the world. If the wider commercial impulses which have helped drive this particular form of television have resulted in greater popular exposure being given to a range of jobs and professions, the challenge for public service broadcasters is to provide a televisual forum which subjects these areas of contemporary society to legitimate, informed and fair public scrutiny.

We would like to thank all those who gave their time and contributed interviews and information to this project.

report:

CADE (Computers in Art and Design Education) 2001, Digital Creativity: Crossing the Border, Glasgow, 9–12 April 2001

As Seona Reid (director of the conference's host institution, Glasgow School of Art) observed in her introduction to the proceedings of CADE 2001, 'Digital Creativity: Crossing the Border', the conference had crossed a very real geographical and political border in visiting Scotland for the first time. While this particular experience of border-crossing was not one that I shared (as a Scot living in Glasgow) the significance of boundaries was clearly at the heart of the conference's concerns. With delegates drawn from the entire spectrum of design and the arts, the issues around borders – disciplinary, cultural, social, and indeed the technical boundary fundamental to the existence of CADE 2001 (that between analogue and digital) – gave rise to much debate and productive tension throughout the three-day event.

As if in recognition of the range of the conference topics and the diversity of delegates' backgrounds, the organizers provided a packed, varied and well-structured programme of events. Each session offered a choice of four panels, interspersed by plenaries and artist talks, with workshops, visits, exhibitions, performances, film and video showings running concurrently. The co-existence of papers banded under the headings 'creativity', 'new generations', 'learning and teaching', 'theory and identity', alongside the more traditional disciplines of 'architecture', 'textiles' and 'dance', pointed again to the tensions around the redefinition and rethinking of disciplinary boundaries.

Despite such a large, and at times overwhelming, menu, the conference ran with impressive smoothness. Any straggling or bewildered-looking delegates were calmly and

cheerfully directed to one of many lecture and seminar rooms in either the School of Art or the nearby Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama by a team of volunteers. The vast potential for technical meltdown, given the subject of the event, was neatly sidestepped as an efficient and effective technical support team kept proceedings largely glitch-free.

This operational seamlessness perhaps went some way to override my one initial dilemma about the conference and its purpose. Considering the breadth of approaches and presentation topics, it was perhaps inevitable that CADE 2001 was, at times, threatened by a lack of focus. On the other hand, its scope, scale and ambitions – together with the sense of theme or agenda suggested by the title, 'Crossing the Border' – did seem to be calling for an overview of core issues and questions.

Since any conference report can reflect only a small and personal snapshot – one individual's impressions of the proceedings tempered by comment and conversations with other delegates – I make no attempt at the global perspective, instead leaving any sense of overview to keynote speakers Simon Penny (opening the conference) and Walter Stewart (at the closing plenary). Their thought-provoking presentations, broadly drawn as they both necessarily were, helped to provide a navigational framework, mapping out some key areas in the vast and sprawling territory.

In his closing keynote speech, Walter Stewart playfully highlighted one issue at stake throughout the three-day event: why should over 200 participants meet to discuss the use of *computers* in art education? Why not, he proposed, devote the same time and energy to the issues surrounding the use of pencils in art education? Or cameras? Or paper?

In making this observation, Stewart was by no means the first to draw attention to the all-embracing yet arguably meaningless title, 'Computers in Art and Design Education', under which such a diverse field of delegates were gathered. His argument – that to remain

fixated with the tools of digital technology as they exist today leads to a limited notion of their potential – echoed the thoughts of delegates throughout the conference. Penny, marking out similar territory to the opening keynote speaker, argued that we needed to break free from our current relationship with the computer, based as it is on the model of the ‘1930s office’ and ‘controlled by command procedures’ drawn from militaristic paradigms. Penny called for cultural practitioners to move from their position as ‘end-users’ of technology to an active engagement in both computing science and computational discourses. Both speakers recognized the need to engage critically and imaginatively with digital technologies in the arts, while acknowledging the difficulties presented both by the gulf between existing technologies and their potential (‘cooking food with a washing machine’, as Penny put it) and by speculative theorizing – of operating in what Stewart described as ‘the kingdom of the not-yet’.

It was the unashamedly techno-utopic Stewart (which, given his Directorship of Global Marketing, Education and Research for Silicon Graphics, SGI, is hardly a surprising position) who made the most far-reaching and ambitious claims for the digital future, evangelizing in particular on its revolutionary impact on education. He argued that digital technologies – in the form of highly sophisticated multi-sensory immersive and virtual reality systems – would replace text and data as the primary means of storing and disseminating knowledge. This, he claimed, would give users a direct, unedited experience as opposed to the authored versions provided by traditional texts. Learning, in the future, would be multi-sensory, non-linear, iterative, experiential and not authority-driven. Unfortunately, a lack of time at the closing plenary prevented any real discussion of these claims.

Both Penny’s and Stewart’s points about the unavoidable gap between the technical

realities of today and the possibilities of tomorrow, in the ‘kingdom of the not-yet’, were, perhaps all too inevitably, illustrated by many of the papers and presentations.

Concepts of interactivity (a conference buzzword), visions of multi-sensory systems and immersive environments were frequently evoked, but remained largely in the realm of the theoretical and hypothetical.

Manifestations of interactivity were mostly confined to a series of pre-determined commands, while the multi-sensory systems that I saw stayed limited to a relatively crude haptic device operated by clumsy gloves and an audio system triggered by physical movement. Despite techno-utopic visions of a device-free future, many of the papers and presentations remained frustratingly mouse-and-screen-bound.

Some notable exceptions took the imaginative leap beyond the limits of current technologies, creatively envisioning and theorizing the future of their disciplines. Practitioners and researchers working in the field of 3-D design and modelling seemed to be behind some of the more innovative approaches. In their presentation, product designers Bahar Sener and Paul Wormald suggested a world beyond the screen and keyboard through their exploration of the designer’s interaction with her/his tools – an emphasis on rethinking the human/computer interface as site of creativity. Mairghread McLundie’s paper, ‘Towards digital environments: crossing the borders’, placed a similar emphasis on the user’s relationship with digital technologies, arguing that we can learn from observing the range of ways in which designers, artists and makers work with artefacts. She recognized the need for a ‘multi-disciplinary collaboration between researchers from design, science and technology’, but one that placed the user firmly at the core of the process.

This emphasis on the interface carried over to an interesting panel of delegates working in the field of (screen-based) interactive

narrative. Andrew Hutchison's presentation, "Juvenate" – an interface to interactive narrative', described his attempt to create a digital narrative artwork that avoided the existing conventions of computer interaction. By subverting the point-and-click command mechanism of the mouse, and avoiding the use of menus or buttons, Hutchison invited the user/spectator to navigate the work in an "incrementing with proximity" interaction mode', where the movement of the mouse caused scene changes not by pointing and clicking but by activating unsigned 'hotspots'. Users had no overview of narrative structure or notion of timeframe. His project highlighted the difficulties of attempting to develop a new method of interaction simply by subverting the existing mechanisms of screen, keyboard and mouse. Users frequently became frustrated with the failure of the mouse to do what they expected and the artwork was eventually redesigned (and 'compromised', in Hutchison's opinion) to include a 'site map'. Hutchison's preoccupations with the user/computer interface lead him to concerns with the long-term cultural and social impacts of digitally mediated interactive narrative.

Making it one of the most coherent panels (that I attended), Hutchison's presentation was joined by contributions from Brent MacGregor and Roddy Simpson on 'Narrative and interactivity in time based non linear media' and Kieran Lyons's paper 'Permeable membranes: the geography of division'. Lyons expanded on the metaphor 'crossing the border' to suggest that 'having been traversed, boundaries then transform themselves into permeable interfaces'. Echoing Hutchison's critical engagement with the interface in the 'new' media of digital interactive art, Lyons shifted the emphasis to the audience/artist relationship. MacGregor and Simpson, both from backgrounds as makers of 'traditional linear audio visual texts, that is, films and video', focused on the relationship of so-called 'old' and 'new' media. They showed

examples of work (Zoe Beloff's *Beyond* and Simpson's own *Snake*) that combined linear and non-linear elements within a single piece, reflecting on how the spectator perceives the different levels of interactivity achieved by linear and non-linear technologies. Moving beyond an analysis of the interactive narrative as artefact, they widened the debate to consider the distribution of what they termed 'interactive movies'.

Unsurprisingly, given the wide range of approaches represented at the conference (including endless variations on the themes of practitioner, academic, educationalist, archivist and technician) the issue of communication across borders was repeatedly both rehearsed and discussed. The possibility, and even desirability, of finding a shared, cross-disciplinary critical discourse in response to digital technologies was the site of considerable debate, frequently revealing, to borrow from Lyons, 'the tensions that exist between those who see borders as impassable boundaries and those who see borders as moments in a permeable membrane'.

As is often the case, and particularly in an event of this size, it was in the less formal groupings that the most productive conversations and exchanges took place, providing, from my point of view, more opportunities to 'cross the border' than the papers and plenaries themselves. Visits to three leading-edge research centres in Glasgow gave delegates from all backgrounds the chance to both witness and share observations on the work being carried out. On my visit to the Virtual Environment Laboratory at Strathclyde University, an architect, product designer and silversmith offered their individual perspectives, asking questions and engaging with the experience in wholly different ways from myself, in a productive and provoking exchange of ideas. Other visits (to Glasgow School of Art's Centre for Advanced Textiles and Digital Design Studio) by all accounts produced equally stimulating cross-fertilizations.

On reflection, the potential for interdisciplinary boundaries to be breached, the space for the free flow and exchange of ideas which the conference provided (mostly in the informal gatherings at coffee, lunch and the three evening drinks receptions laid on by the organizers – the latter reinforcing Glasgow’s reputation for hospitality) compensated for any perceived lack of

thematic focus. Arguably, the conference’s success lay not in tackling the big ideas, but in allowing – and actively encouraging – the kind of connections which might help shape a digital future that places the needs of the individual at its heart.

Minty Donald

reviews

review:

John Corner: *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 220 pp.

Jason Jacobs: *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 190 pp.

JOHN ELLIS

What is television? This question has preoccupied practitioners and students alike since the medium struggled into existence. The question becomes more rather than less insistent as the medium evolves. At first sight this is strange, as though cinema studies were still asking the question set by André Bazin fifty years ago. In fact, it results from the way that the medium infiltrates modern culture so as to be inseparable from it. As Corner puts it in his *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*, television has 'both centrifugal and centripetal dynamics, ingesting selectively from the wider culture with voracious energy and disseminating images, often at high impetus, across the full range of public and private life' (p. 127). Such a process of exteriorizing interiority is difficult to capture analytically, and means that virtually any writing about the medium at some point has to address the problem of the very nature of that medium, even if only to measure the partiality of the particular methodology being adopted. Both these texts (which at first sight have nothing in common apart from being published as part of the excellent Oxford Television Series) address this problem of totalization and analytic register.

John Corner is rash enough to confront the problem head on. His ambiguous title (are the ideas 'crucial' or 'interrogatory'?) could be

that of a textbook. Even the chapter divisions could be those of a textbook: 'Institution', 'Image', 'Talk', 'Narrative', 'Flow', 'Production', 'Reception', 'Pleasure', 'Knowledge'. But the writing constantly keeps questions of the multi-faceted nature of the medium to the fore, stressing their interconnectedness. Corner does not introduce key concepts in turn; rather he debates their relative merits. This is nothing less than a considered stocktaking of the major currents in the British school of television studies, producing a conceptual map of television from the diversity of approaches to it. Few would attempt this; fewer would be able to do it successfully. But Corner succeeds, acting throughout as a patient group facilitator, taking every contribution seriously, referring its problems to its origins within often long-forgotten polemics or the particular turns of the medium which gave rise to a current of reflection.

This is an essential book for anyone wishing to understand television, but such a project invites criticisms for what it does not include, and this is probably the only way of furthering the debate. The chapter on Production harks back to an era when television was less permeable to researchers and more secretive about its own activities. In such an era, 'production studies' were called for and delivered. The references in this chapter are to works now at least twenty years old. Television has since become more open about its immediate physical production processes, providing both 'Making Of...' shows and a level of self-analysis.¹ Hence accounts of production are no longer needed in the same way. However, accounts of decision-making, of management processes, certainly are. The mysteries of production now lie at this level.

Some contributions are unaccountably absent, such as Ien Ang's trenchant critiques of empirical approaches to audience research.² Also missing are important approaches that seek to embed television within an understanding of everyday life. Paddy Scannell's phenomenological work on everydayness is present,³ but approaches which draw on anthropology and critical sociology are not. In this regard, Corner's book has to be read in conjunction with Roger Silverstone's *Television and Everyday Life*, which offers a cornucopia of possible approaches to the domestic phenomenon of television.⁴ Corner attempts to use the term 'reception' to cover this area: this is where Lyn Spigel's *Make Room for TV* appears, for example.⁵ However 'reception' is a text-oriented concept, inextricable from the understanding of the interaction between viewers and broadcast signals. Yet there is another important perspective, that of how television has intervened in the reconstruction of domestic space, a phenomenon that can be summed up as 'television is the only domestic commodity that sells other commodities'. Television brings with it a life-style, an attitude to leisure, and promulgates many styles of life. When Corner concludes his overview by asserting 'the dual identity of television as both a knowledge system and a pleasure

1 See for example Channel 4's *Media Show* (1985–90) or *Right to Reply* (1982–2001), and Radio 4's *The Message*, plus the level of detail now found in the trade press (for example, *Broadcast*) and media supplements in the broadsheet newspapers.

2 See Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London: Routledge, 1991) and *Living Room Wars* (London: Routledge, 1996).

3 Unfortunately, Scannell's immensely useful article, 'For-anyone-as-someone structures', was published after Corner had finished his book, in *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2000), pp. 5–24.

4 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994).

5 Lyn Spigel, *Make Room for TV* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

system' (p. 127), we should add a third identity: a commodity system. It would be difficult to fit this further identity into Corner's schema, which is not to invalidate it but rather to re-emphasize the difficulties of producing a totalizing account of the medium.

Jacobs has no such totalizing ambitions. Nevertheless, he is almost immediately entangled in the 'what is television?' debate because his subjects (the pioneers of television drama production in Britain) carried on an insistent dialogue amongst themselves and in public on this subject. Jacobs is not interested in their conclusions in themselves, however, so much as the symptomatic reading of them. For his is a book about absence. Not one BBC television drama is known to exist from the period before 1950, and precious little from the years after. Archivists maintain a Micawberish 'something will turn up' attitude, but, given the lack of a satisfactory means of even filming a television signal from a monitor until 1947, it is hard to see what will.⁶ Jacobs therefore deduces the probable nature of the texts from the discourses that surrounded them. These include annotated scripts and studio plans, memoranda and committee minutes, contemporary reviews, articles from *The Listener* and *Radio Times*, more considered writing, interviews with Alexandra Palace veterans, and published reminiscences. A general account of the three main periods (1936–9, 1946–50, 1951–5) is followed by case studies of actual productions reconstructed from such evidence. As if to validate the method, the last case study is of the 1954 production of *Nineteen Eighty Four*, directed by Rudolph Cartier, of which a well-known recording does exist.

From the start, the practitioners of the medium were at pains to define this medium of not-quite-radio, not-quite-cinema, not-quite-theatre. The idea of 'intimacy', which provides Jacobs's title, was the term used to define television's specificity during the period, and at points Jacobs seems to buy into it himself. At other points he stresses that many in television were defining the 'essence' of the medium from the particular accidents of contemporary technologies and resources. In fact, Jacob's accounts of these dramas, particularly from the initial period 1936–9 point towards a highly distinctive aesthetic: a dream-like quality born of the use of slow dissolves (direct cuts were technically impossible before the war); superimpositions that might have lasted minutes rather than seconds; and generally a necessary avoidance of the messianic notions of 'realism' that settled on the medium around the end of the 1950s. This was a live medium which had the interesting misfortune of coming from a dead space. Resources did not allow live location drama, nor even the use of film, except as library material or, rarely, inserts.⁷ 'Intimacy' emerged as a defining term because there was little in television drama apart from the actors' performances, rendered in a way that neither film nor theatre nor radio could hope to do.

6 However, incurable optimists will take heart from Don McLean's website, www.dfm.dircon.co.uk, with its transcriptions from discs carrying recordings of material made on the Baird system

7 The first drama filmed by the BBC was made in 1954, after bought-in American material had already been screened. Since Hollywood companies were involved in American television, filming drama was commonplace almost from the start of serious television provision after 1945. *I Love Lucy* revolutionized the industry in 1951 by using three film cameras to shoot a sitcom under 'live' conditions, subsequently editing to produce a new kind of distinctively televisual product.

- 8 Carl Gardner and John Wyver, 'The single play from Reithian reverence to cost-accounting and censorship', *Screen*, vol. 25, nos 4–5 (1983).
- 9 John Corner (ed.), *Popular Television in Britain* (London: British Film Institute, 1991).
- 10 John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Jacobs sets out to revise the stereotype of early television drama as 'canned theatre'. This is something of a straw man derived from a polemic from 1980 worked up into an article for this journal in 1983⁸. More careful accounts exist, from the pivotal collection edited by John Corner⁹ and by his series editor, John Caughie, in his *Television Drama*.¹⁰ In fact, Jacobs abandons polemic in favour of something more engaging: a vivid sense of the workings of early television as disparate individuals struggled to produce creditable drama in constrained conditions. There was the ever-present threat of the bureaucratic imposition of a radio aesthetic, or even organization subordination to radio. There was the, to our eyes, extraordinary idea of the BBC in 1949 acquiring a site at White City with the intention to build a Television Centre 'by 1960' (p. 82), whilst producers struggled with the constraints of Alexandra Palace and Lime Grove. There was the problem of creating a topical schedule when drama production involved long-term planning, not least in the booking of actors. The account of the chaos caused by some of Cecil McGivern's last-minute changes could, with a judicious changing of names, be descriptions of Alan Yentob's tenure as controller of BBC2 in the 1980s.

The one point where his account falters is around Val Gielgud's few months as Head of Drama (sound and vision) in 1950–51. Gielgud was brought in from radio to 'beef up' the drama policy at Alexandra Palace. Instead, his appointment succeeded in provoking the resignation of Norman Collins, who immediately became a key figure in the campaign for commercial television, and his own television drama, *Party Manners*, brought the television service its first major censorship event. Jacobs does not mention where Collins went, and deals with the *Party Manners* affair in an inelegant footnote. A fuller account would have opened the book to many of the wider questions of how the medium and the BBC negotiated television's nascent social existence during the period.

Instead, Jacobs sticks to the texts. But in doing so, his method raises a vital question. Since no recordings of actual productions exist, he deduces from available evidence what they might well have been like. Imagine trying to do this for British films of the 1930s, in a situation where the written records of the studios were meticulously preserved (as did the BBC), and a substantial proportion of Hollywood production still existed. Would we be able to deduce the probable form of *Things to Come* and *Sing As We Go*, *The Thirty Nine Steps* or *The Private Life of Henry VIII*? On balance, we probably could, because the film industry was even then enveloped in discourses and institutional practices through which the films were understood. We might have lost the films, but we still would have the cinemas and memories of how they were used, the varied reviews, the annotated scripts and the interdepartmental memos. All can be made to speak about the assumptions of the time, not because

they report on them but because they are an integral part of them. As it is, the films themselves become increasingly treacherous as history moves them away from us: modern responses to them vary between the poles of re-use without reference to the past or interpretation which seeks to restore their contemporary context.

Jacobs's achievement, and lesson to media scholarship as a whole, is to show that the discursive context of television drama in this period is sufficiently 'thick' to enable him to deduce the form of its lost texts. The implication is fascinating: that television texts are intertextual to the extent that they are dependent for their meaning on the discourses that surround them and on which they float. This argues for a conjunctural study of television texts, which pays attention to the moment of transmission for which they are to a greater or lesser extent designed, and the everyday preoccupations and tensions that made up the tissue of that moment. John Corner has clearly shown the complexities that bear down upon the phenomenon of television. The continuing challenge is how to produce adequate understandings of its texts.

review:

Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 221 pp.

VINCENT PORTER

1950s British cinema has generally had a bad press. Its films have been attacked from both sides of the critical spectrum as neither reflecting social reality nor demonstrating any genuinely artistic talent. Thus for Geoff Brown, 'staring at British cinema in the 50s is like staring into a void',¹ while for Victor Perkins, writing in 1962 on behalf of the editorial board of *Movie*, 'British cinema was as dead as it had been five years earlier, for with the exception of Robert Hamer, Seth Holt and Karel Reisz, all British directors lacked talent'.² Even so, despite the opprobrium of the critical elite, between 1949 and the early 1960s the British film industry was not only commercially viable but also popular with the British public. Year in and year out, as even a cursory survey of the annual reviews of box-office successes shows, British producers consistently made pictures that were able to compete head-to-head with those coming out of Hollywood. What is at stake, therefore, in any historical study of 1950s British cinema is whether it helps us understand why those films were so popular and what they can tell us about the social and psychological realities of life in 1950s Britain.

Christine Geraghty has adopted the well-known method developed by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni in their article 'Cinema/ideology/criticism'.³ They advocated reading against the grain of the film text, responding to moments of discontinuity and disruption as if they were psychoanalytic symptoms that could be analyzed for truer and darker meanings. It is an approach that has already proved

1 Geoff Brown, 'Paradise found and lost: the course of British realism', in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), p. 193.

2 Victor F. Perkins, for the editorial board of *Movie*, 'The British Cinema', *Movie*, no. 1 (June 1962), pp. 1–9.

3 Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/ideology/criticism', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, Volume 1 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976).

productive in reading 1950s Hollywood melodrama and film noir. The critical issue, therefore, is how well this approach improves the manner in which we can read British films of the 1950s.

Geraghty sets out to explore the relationships between the continuing movement towards modernity during the decade and the manner in which feature films represented that movement. She draws on evidence from works by various contemporary theorists, such as Bowlby on childcare, Fyvel on offenders, Hemming on adolescent girls, Newsom on education and above all Hopkins on the postwar social revolution, to unravel and inform the social, psychological and political concerns of the age, and so inform the manner in which she reads a number of first feature films produced during the period.⁴ Potentially this method has the advantage of ensuring that her work is informed by the debates that were taking place at that time, and thus not dictated merely by the wisdom of hindsight. Her approach also provides a genuinely different take on the perpetual debate between those historians who see feature films as a reflection of the social reality of the day, and those who see them as little more than a reflection of people's fantasies. Even so, Geraghty's approach still raises problems. She gives little consideration to agency – namely when and by whom the films were produced – or to their relative success or failure at the box office. This therefore still leaves her readings of individual films open to the charge that they 'fit where they touch'.

This is a pity, because many of Geraghty's readings are insightful and genuinely valuable. She examines in particular the manner in which 1950s films portrayed three interlocking themes: the opposition and resistances to modernity, the portrayal through personal relations of the changing political relations between Britain and Europe and the Commonwealth, and the choices offered to audiences, especially female audiences, in rebalancing relationships both between men and women and within the nuclear family. Interestingly, however, she does not address the more profound moment of discontinuity that took place during the decade, that between the end of traditional comedies and dramas and the arrival of social realism.

Although Geraghty adopts a broadly feminist approach, her readings are rooted in a careful analysis of the film texts and at points she takes issue with other female writers – notably Sue Harper, and following her Pam Cook – who have sought to draw a clear and firm distinction between the melodramas produced by Gainsborough and the realist dramas made at Ealing. Geraghty agrees that the narratives of *It Always Rains On Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947), *Cage of Gold* (Basil Dearden, 1950) and *Dance Hall* (Charles Crichton, 1950) all make it clear that in order to take a socially responsible decision, the principal female character has to make an emotional sacrifice – normally because the character of the man who represents the more glamorous choice is severely compromised. But

4 John Bowlby, *Childcare and the Growth of Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965); Tosco Raphael Fyvel, *The Insecure Offender* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961); James Hemming, *Problems of Adolescent Girls* (London: Heinemann, 1960); John Newsom, *Half Our Future: a Report of the Central Advisory Committee for Education* (London: HMSO, 1963); Harry Hopkins, *The New Look: a Social History of the Forties and Fifties* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1963).

she argues that, as in the Gainsborough melodramas, the woman's dilemma is expressed visually through the mise-en-scene by contrasting the naturalist emphasis on the rhythms of everyday life with the special effects needed to represent the more glamorous alternatives (p. 84). This leads her to argue that although Ealing's drive for realism made its films different from the Gainsborough melodramas, they did not necessarily deny the emotional cost of the decisions that their female characters are required to make. In none of the films, she concludes, 'does the audience enjoy the marriage ceremony, in which the heroine confirms the good choice that will bind her into post-war society' (p. 86). In reaching these conclusions, Geraghty analyzes neither Balcon's attitudes towards women, nor does she produce any evidence for her final leap from a description of what is encoded in the film text to her conclusion about the manner in which that text was read by audiences.

The difficulty for the film historian is that film texts were read by audiences in a range of ways. As each person brought to them their own set of social values and emotional needs, it is never easy to be sure precisely how each person read them at the time, and there is always a danger of the historian imposing upon them the wisdom of hindsight. This is especially true for a text in which the verbal and the visual codes carry potentially contradictory messages. I suggest that it is only when a film was really popular that it can be identified as socially significant, and that even then the ideological, visual, gestural and verbal complexities and contradictions within the text itself may enable it to be a film that simultaneously looks forwards to modernity and harks back to tradition.

Here, Geraghty's chapter on femininity in the 1950s is much stronger. She concentrates on the star personae of Kay Kendall and Virginia McKenna, and the interplay in their films of the four contradictory demands of motherhood, sexuality, work and consumption. For during the 1950s, the 'new woman' was expected to fulfil all four roles in what was then termed a 'companionate marriage'. Geraghty explores and analyzes the contradictions demanded of Rosalind (Kendall) and Wendy (Dinah Sheridan) in *Genevieve*, the surprise box-office success of 1953, in which they have to use tolerance, patience, frustration, anger and finally understanding to attract the consideration and attention of an emotionally immature boyfriend (Kenneth More) and a companionate husband (John Gregson) respectively. Only then can they come to terms with the men's obsessions for their veteran cars. Here, it becomes clear that the complex interplay of the relationships identified by Geraghty, between female and male characters who are both married and unmarried, past companions and present partners, allows individual members of the audience to adopt a range of emotional attitudes towards the characters' light-hearted antics.

Similarly, Geraghty highlights the fact that the mature femininity

of Virginia McKenna, whose screen persona was that of a typical 'English rose', could only really flourish under conditions of wartime adversity such as those demanded in *A Town Like Alice* (Jack Lee, 1956) and *Carve Her Name With Pride* (Lewis Gilbert, 1958). In the former, the mature woman could only become competent, feminine, sexual and motherly in the barbarism of the jungle. In the latter film, the 'English rose' was only able to mature from a girlish shop assistant into a mother and resistance fighter for a brief moment in the middle of the film. Almost immediately she had done so, this point of balance was destroyed and the 'English rose' had to learn to act like a masculine hero before she could resist – and ultimately be martyred by – the Nazis.

There is, however, either a reluctance or a refusal on Geraghty's part to recognize that it was precisely these textual compromises and ambiguities that allowed these films to become so popular, because it was only in this manner that they could offer alternative meanings to different spectators. For although the progress towards modernism may have been inexorable, it was never smooth. Nor did people either recognize, or accept at the same speed, the challenges that modernism posed to their daily lives. There was a similar ambiguity in the most popular war films. They not only appealed to those men, even younger men, who still accepted the social order of the previous decade, but their military energies also nourished those adolescent males who were beginning to reject the restraint and deference required by the established social order.

The process of social change during the 1950s was, as always, one of struggle; and there were both leaders and laggards in that struggle. The decline of the postwar deference that took place during the decade may well have taken place in the sexual as well as the social sphere, but it did so at markedly different speeds for different individuals. Some were ready to exercise their independence early on, but others hung on to traditional values. Although the films of the period may reflect the forces and values that shaped those changes, some producers adopted them more readily than others. Furthermore, the powerful filters of gender, age, social class and, indeed, the psychological disposition of individual spectators may well have meant that they read, or 'fitted into', those texts in different ways. Thus each film could command a range of readings. Indeed, I suggest that the two most popular genres of the decade, the comedies and the war films, were able to achieve that status precisely because they could rise above the everyday struggle. They not only provided a refuge from modernity as Geraghty argues, but they also offered a disguised means of accepting its discontents.

Despite these reservations, Geraghty's book represents a substantial advance on most earlier analyses of 1950s British films and it should be read by every social and cultural historian of the decade.

review:

Gregory Flaxman (ed.), *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 395 pp.

DAVID MARTIN-JONES

During the 1990s, books on Deleuze and cinema slowly began to emerge within Anglo-American film studies.¹ The next decade will undoubtedly see more. The question that must be asked of *The Brain is the Screen* is how will writing that stems from Deleuze's work negotiate a place within the already existing field of film theory?

Rather like Deleuze's twin cinema texts of the 1980s,² *The Brain is the Screen* holds something of a precarious position between philosophy and film theory. As Deleuze himself avowed, it was this indiscernible 'becoming-(each)-other' of the two methodologies that allowed his work to introduce new ideas into both disciplines. It is also this that makes both his work, and texts like this one, so difficult for either discipline to accommodate. The very existence of this text, then, is evidence of a space opening up for Deleuzian work in film studies. Before you can make a discipline think differently about itself, however, you must engage with its pre-existing territories. It is here that the texts brought together by Gregory Flaxman can be assessed on terms other than their philosophical content.

There are two major ways in which *The Brain is the Screen* succeeds. Firstly, where it does engage with existing movements within film studies, mostly in the second of its three sections, it is able to offer new ways of thinking about already existing issues, in particular, film history. Secondly, in the first and third sections, film

- 1 Three books which utilize Deleuze, or take Deleuzian approaches to aspects of cinema are: Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (London: Duke University Press, 1997); Michael Shapiro, *Cinematic Political Thought: Narrating Race, Nation and Gender* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989).

is related to perception and thought in ways that are, if not new in themselves, then at least new to the field.

The essays that begin the second section, 'Mapping images', by András Bálint Kovács and Angelo Restivo, are not so much companion pieces as they are different takes on the same Deleuzian approach. As such they show an admirable move on the part of the editor, Flaxman, who is not afraid to show that there are many different ways of using Deleuze. The issue at stake between these two approaches is whether we can align Deleuze's periodization of the shift from 'movement' into 'time' images with the already existing definitions of classical and modern cinema.

Kovács contends that 'Whether we like it or not, Deleuze's model is linear' (p. 158). With an implicit shift of emphasis away from abstract approaches, such as that of Metz, Deleuze's work is shown to be inherently tied to his project of historicizing cinematic development. Although a welcome interpretation in the sense that movement and time images are not deemed to be universally applicable categories, as Metzian semiotics is, Kovács misreads Deleuze's intent to a certain degree when he reterritorializes him within a linear evolutionary model.

Restivo's work, on the other hand, situates the development between the types of image outlined by Deleuze within a Foucauldian, epistemic paradigm. Although Deleuze himself saw cinema as enacting the revolution in philosophy that took place from antiquity to the present, Restivo re-addresses Deleuze's own historical position, drawing a more modest parallel between the shift in cinematic thought theorized by Deleuze, and the shift between the modern and the postmodern epistemes. This approach provides a more nuanced reading than that of Kovács, a point from which he proceeds to analyze three specific film instances of the 'breach' between epistemes.

A confusion of terminology soon becomes apparent when Deleuze's historical periodization meets that of film studies. The organic regime that manifests itself in the movement-image and the crystalline regime of the time-image are termed 'classical' and 'modern' cinemas by Deleuze. These terms are not, however, directly equatable with their previous use within film studies. For Deleuze, 'classical' refers to the image of thought that has characterized philosophical thought on time from antiquity to the present. This can be seen in movement-images, cinema before World War II in general, including not only American, but also French, German and Russian montage styles. This is very different from the use of the term to describe a set of cinematic practices, the so-called, 'Classical Hollywood' style; even if the organic evolution of form produced by each is roughly the same. The term 'modern', for its part, refers to a new way of conceiving time that characterizes a trend in philosophy after Nietzsche and Bergson. This is illustrated by the time-image,

and is seen in certain cinemas that emerged after World War II. Again, this is not the same as the stylistic definition of the cinema termed 'modern' by film studies. As Restivo states, the dissolution of narrative after the war is not the result of 'post-war malaise' (p. 175), but is the exploration of the new potential available to cinema in the time-image, that of the crystalline regime.

What these works show is that a periodization which proceeds through progressive 'images of thought' is able to incorporate within its strategies such niggling difficulties as the existence of the avant-garde: the excluded other that enabled film theory to posit its own peculiar classical/modern binary in the first place. Moreover, the possibility of a working definition of the postmodern is given a new lease of life both by Restivo's epistemic approach and Dudley Andrew's excellent Deleuzian take on third cinema. Whilst an implied theme in many of the essays, however, few address it explicitly.

Several other such matters pertaining to film theory are noticeable by their absence. Although Flaxman quite rightly states in his introduction that the canonical chimera (Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, structuralist semiotics) is no longer invoked within film theory to the degree that it once was – as indeed 'theory' in general takes a back seat – a more active engagement with discourses surrounding the mythological monster would have been welcome in places. There is still space yet to be explored here, such as, how can a philosophical approach offer new answers to the old questions posed by grand theory?

The work of François Zourabichvili, for example, utilizes Bergson in order to stress the non-anthropomorphic nature of perception. The application of this approach to Vertov, however, is rather limiting, and the implicit meta-questions of cinema that it raises are entirely ignored. What becomes of point of view and spectator positioning if we theorize the subject as merely a centre of indetermination within an objective realm of images? Eric Alliez and Tom Conley, both seeking to explain the philosophical concept of the 'event' (which they do wonderfully), also side-step this issue of how the spectator experiences this cinematic 'event'. The implicit assumption running through these articles is that Deleuzian film theory is either an abstract philosophy for analyzing the mechanics of image perception, or for narrative analysis, but not for analyzing the perception of narrative images. As one French thinker might have said, there is much to be seen here that is left unsaid.

The general lack of object-based discussion is also apparent. The book begins with the bang of the big guns: Jean-Clet Martin opening with a rampage through several of Deleuze's most convoluted theories, commenting in passing on Bergson, Leibniz, the baroque fold, architecture, et al. Every word speaks of cinema, of the relation between images and the way in which we think. Indeed, it is as

brilliant a piece as one would expect. Yet Martin does not really talk about film, or more importantly, any films. Rather, he discusses Deleuze and the images of Van Gogh. The briefest of mentions of Kurosawa's masterful short on Van Gogh – part of *Dreams* (Akira Kurosawa, 1990) – is included without any real pretence to commitment. This is an unapologetic contribution for die-hard fans of Deleuze only. The major difficulty is that it sets a certain precedent for the book as a whole, and whilst very interesting, it is perhaps not altogether appropriate for a book on philosophy and cinema.

A significant problem with all the essays included is that the in-depth theoretical basis for much of the work is given in the form of a gloss. This is understandable due to restrictions on length for each piece, and, moreover, Flaxman does sterling work to introduce many of the necessary concepts. For the film studies scholar interested in Deleuze, however, this, coupled with the distinct lack of case studies, does not make this the most approachable of texts.

The same criticism can be applied to Flaxman's own essay in section one, 'Approaching images', which forays into the finer points of Bergson's views on perception and thought. In Flaxman's, and again in Martin Schwab's piece that follows, however, there is at least a greater transparency of style. This is enough to illuminate what is happening here, the emergence of a new form of writing within film studies, neither film or philosophy exactly, but a philosophy of cinema.

Schwab does choose to discuss the somewhat esoteric *Film* (Alan Schneider, 1965) in order to show that 'Deleuze's image-ontology remains insensitive to the specifics of cinema' (p. 109). Schwab critiques Deleuze's own reading of *Film*, providing a much more in-depth analysis, and exposes several flaws in Deleuze's theorizing. This detraction of Deleuze emphasizes that, although the cinema texts blaze a trail into undiscovered country, there is much for film studies to be cautious of when utilizing them. Schwab's eventual deconstruction of Deleuze moreover, is also suggestive of the power that film studies has to influence philosophy. It is here that the strengths of *The Brain is the Screen* become more apparent.

Laura Marks's piece, in section two, pushes Deleuze's Peircean typology of signs beyond the over-generalized conclusions reached in *Cinema I* through an analysis of the stylistics of Lebanese documentaries. By refining Deleuze in this way, Marks shows that the percepts available to film studies can contribute to the creation of philosophical concepts, but only through an object-based discussion. In this way, when it works, the two disciplines are literally becoming-(each)-other. It is this commitment to use Deleuze's broad philosophical sweeps in conjunction with specific instances of film that offers the most potential for this type of study.

The idea of a philosophy of cinema is more fully developed in

section three, 'Thinking Images'. Although at times the articles seem to venerate Deleuze, they do show that a Deleuzian approach can take film studies in a new direction. Gregg Lambert's work on Eisenstein initially examines why the revolutionary potential of the 'art of the masses' became 'Hitler and Hollywood, Hollywood and Hitler', before exploring how the cinema can now be 'thought' beyond this ideological positioning (p. 267). How can we escape truth, representation, cliché? Sadly, Lambert's work eventually proves to be something of a dead end: Eisenstein does not hold the answers, the movement-image being bound tightly with a classical (in a Deleuzian sense) notion of time, evolution and truth.

The time-image does, however, offer possibilities, exemplified by Peter Canning's excellent closing piece dealing with the impossibility of representation after events like the holocaust, and decolonization. Questioning the relationship between cinema and morality in an era marked by 'truth in crisis', he interrogates why we continue to propagate moral narratives through cinema, the 'interminable reruns of the psychomoral heroic automaton' (p. 331). Canning does not leave us with 'Hitler and Hollywood', rather he points to the potential seen by Deleuze in the cinematic enunciation of the 'crystal of time'. A cinema of creative ethics is advocated in the conclusion to an excellent article in which the only drawback is, once again, that it does not go very far towards saying what films might exemplify such a movement.

The book ends with a previously unpublished interview with Deleuze, from which the title, *The Brain is the Screen*, is taken. Deleuze's comments justify many of the moves made in the collection, and is a fairly clear introduction to what is at stake in the cinema texts. The slant of the questioning (from the *Cahiers* crew) reveals much of Deleuze's very 'French' concerns: witness his usual dislike of television, and defence of auteur cinema. Even so, the final section on time and the image stresses the message of the book itself, that through philosophy there has been made available an entirely new tool for exploring cinema.

Despite being fairly critical of this book from a film studies standpoint, it does make valuable inroads into the field, especially when it engages philosophy with cinema. Seen from a purely philosophical point of view there is much less to be critical of, and it should not be forgotten that the negotiation of such close neighbours – film and philosophy – is not an easy task.

review:

John Thornton Caldwell (ed.) *Electronic Media and Technoculture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 331 pp.

Georgette Wang, Jan Servaes and Anura Goonarasekera (eds), *The New Communications Landscape: Demystifying Media Globalization*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 336 pp.

e-britannia: the communications revolution. Luton: University of Luton Press, 2000, 165 pp.

SARA GWENLLIAN JONES

In *Haunted Media*, his study of the history of electronic media, Jeffrey Sconce concludes with a cautionary message:

150 years from today, it is doubtful anyone will be discussing or even remember our current debates over simulation, hyperreality, cyborgs, cyberspace, techno-bodies, or virtual subjectivity, except perhaps for a few baffled historians interested in the peculiar, mystifying power that a certain section of the intelligentsia invested in their media systems.¹

To Sconce's list of occult academic neologisms we might add the terminology of extremes that characterizes so many critical engagements with digital communications technologies, convergence and globalization. Overused phrases such as 'the digital revolution', 'the digital divide' and 'information rich and information poor' melodramatically constitute digitalization as a singular and overwhelming seismic event that has come as if from nowhere to rupture and overturn a previously orderly technological progress. This emphasis upon the singularity and potency of digital technologies is

¹ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 209.

allied to the largely ahistorical approaches that have thus far dominated its study and theorization. Deprived of historical context, digitalization can appear sudden, unprecedented and uncontrollable, a technological phenomenon of unforeseeable global consequence. It is little wonder, then, that media and academic commentaries alike have tended to address digital technologies through the rhetoric of novelty and anxiety. Of all the adrenalin-injected terms applied to new media, none is more frequently or more carelessly used than the word 'revolution'. Every week brings yet another book with a title that pronounces the internet, digital or new media 'revolution'. One must wonder why, given the alleged radical impact of digitalization, we still require something as old-fashioned and emphatically non-digital as books to tell us about it.

The widespread misapplication of the term 'revolution' to the current situation is the subject of Brian Winston's contribution to John Thornton Caldwell's *Electronic Media and Technoculture*. As Winston points out, 'the current "revolution" can only be deemed to be occurring if the various transformations [of telecommunications technologies] are ignored and the phases of technological performance are misread' (p. 88). Winston's statement could stand as a manifesto for this collection as a whole. The essays gathered here have been carefully and intelligently selected for the purpose of historicizing and contextualizing critical work on new media, drawing out its interconnections with theorizations of earlier technologies and its relations to industry practices. Structured around the key areas of technohistory, production, consumption and 'boundaries, identities, practice', *Electronic Media and Technoculture* forms a historical and conceptual map of the theoretical terrain. The first section groups together essays by Raymond Williams, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Brian Winston and Bill Nicholls, situating these emblematic theorizations of both 'old' and 'new' media so as to establish a platform of continuity that also functions as a timely reminder that *all* media start out as *new* media, and that nifty speculation that veers between gloom and joy is ever the attendant of significant technological advance. Here, Williams's discussion of determinism and Enzensberger's exploration of the radical, interactive potential of media technologies resonate powerfully with contemporary claims for new media.

The essays included in section two relate serious misgivings about the production and operations of technoculture. Arthur Kroker's and Michael Weinstein's essay 'The theory of the virtual class' argues that a technical elite – the 'monarchs of the electronic kingdom' – has emerged to take advantage of the pan-nationalism of both global capitalism and virtuality, allowing the elite to further exploit workers and the Third World whilst cynically replacing ethics and human rights with a 'soft ideology' based on the 'three key illusions' of interactivity, (cyber)knowledge and expanded choice. Vivian

Sobchack's 'The scene of the screen' is an intriguing phenomenological account that explores cinematic representations of the technological, contrasting the affirmation of 'embodied being' effected by cinematic presence with the devalued physical body of electronic representation. The section closes with Allucquère Rosanne Stone's influential 'Sex, death and machinery', which shares some of Sobchack's concerns about technoculture's subordination of embodied experience in favour of, to use Stone's own expression, 'prosthetic communication'.

The third and fourth sections (respectively titled 'Consuming technoculture' and 'Boundaries, identities, practices') consist mainly of essays which in some way engage, cautiously, with the unpredictability of consumers/users who, in some instances at least, use electronic media technologies in ways not authorized either by the communications industry or by some of the scholars who have written about it. Ien Ang's 'New technologies, audience measurement, and the tactics of television consumption' explores the 'elusive tactics' of the equally elusive television 'audience'; Helen Cunningham's 'Mortal Kombat and computer game girls' challenges the critical and market orthodoxy that girls do not play computer games, exploring how the domestication of games has significantly increased girls' access to and understanding of new technology. Ravi Sundaram's 'Beyond the nationalist panopticon' examines the disjuncture between the three Indian 'cyberpublics' of state, transnational elite and activist in their attitudes towards and uses of 'Western' internet technologies. And Chicano performance artist Gómez-Peña joyfully wreaks havoc on binaries established by scholars who overlook 'so-called Third World' web-users in order to wax academical about Third World exclusion from cyberspace. Positioning himself as a boundary-confounding 'cyber-immigrant' or 'webback', Gómez-Peña presents a defiant manifesto which expresses a wish 'to "brownify" virtual space, to "Spanglishize the Net", and to "infect" the lingua francas' (p. 307).

Other essays in these two sections focus upon the play of power that shapes, and is further shaped by, television and internet technologies. Cynthia Cockburn's 'The circuit of technology' and Ellen Seiter's 'Television and the internet' both emphasize the need to make concrete connections between technologies, their functions and uses, and the operations of power in the hierarchization of gender, class and race. Andrew Ross's 'Hacking away at the counter-culture' is a powerful reminder that a powerful, mobile communications industry can transform even its most radical and technologically proficient activists and antagonists into a source of revenue.

Scholarly work on both digital technologies and globalization is always obliged to confront the simple fact that these rapidly evolving and interrelated territories, each constantly kaleidoscopically

rearranging its constituent elements, are to some extent theoretically unmanageable. In their introduction to *The New Communications Landscape*, Georgette Wang and Jan Servaes wryly observe that 'changes in the world communications industry in recent years have been so rapid and drastic that observing it is like observing a bullet train in motion – we all know that it is very fast, heading somewhere, but that is about all' (p. 1).

Lie's and Servaes's chapter engages directly with the difficulty of studying this shifting terrain, proposing that instead of researching the linear process of production, distribution and consumption, scholars of globalization adopt a 'nodal point' approach that identifies points of convergence and intersection such as (they suggest) production, regulation, the local entry point of the communication flow, representation, consumption and action (p. 323). Necessity is ever the mother of invention, and many of the eighteen essays in this collection already utilize approaches resembling this nodal point model, their analyses shifting back and forth between key intersections of the local, the national and the global.

All of the essays in this collection reject easy formulae that constitute globalization as yet another of capitalism's uniformly bad objects, acknowledging and examining its benefits as well as its pitfalls. Analyzing the impact of globalization and decentralization upon geographic entities as various as Scotland, Thailand, China, Latin America, Europe and Taiwan, the essays here often draw unexpected conclusions that run counter to some of the more alarmist claims made about the nefarious effects of global communications. Colin Sparks's essay, for example, examines the interplay between the global, the local and the public sphere, and concludes that although 'the scope for activity of even the most powerful of states is circumscribed by global forces' the state nevertheless remains 'the most powerful of social actors' (p. 92) and a meaningful arena for democratic process. Paul S.N. Lee's essay takes issue with the equation of globalization and homogenization, arguing that the diversity of cultures and tastes around the world makes their homogenization by global television 'very unlikely' (p. 191). Often, he argues, it is foreign cultural products which must adapt to local cultures if they are to find a market among them.

Compared with these two volumes, *e-britannia: the communications revolution* is narrow both in scope and critical perspective. As its title suggests, it belongs to the ever-expanding subgenre of 'digital revolution' books described at the beginning of this review. The blurb on the cover advertises its subject matter as 'a revolution in communications; a revolution every bit as significant as the Industrial Revolution'. But *e-britannia's* subject matter is not so much 'the communications revolution' as the fate of public service broadcasting (here, of course, meaning the BBC) in the brave new world of convergent technologies and industries. A furtive footnote,

tucked away on page four of the foreword, reveals that the essays gathered here were commissioned by the BBC 'as a contribution to debate on the future of broadcasting and communications in the UK'. In keeping with this agenda, many of these essays emphasize strategy over analysis; their main objective is to chart sketchily the current situation, prophesize where it might be taking us, and suggest how the BBC must adapt and innovate if it is to succeed in this new media landscape and itself become a global content provider. Often this makes for frustrating reading, as complexities are glossed over, assertions made as if they were self-evidently true, and arguments frequently hinge upon rhetorical rather than critical points. Most of these essays unquestioningly reiterate the assertion that only public service broadcasting (and, by extension, only the BBC) can deliver 'quality' programmes, innovative content, and universal access. Thus, Charles Leadbeater's contribution opens with a eulogy to the BBC, while Virginia Bottomley blithely asserts that 'the strengths of the BBC are in its values: integrity, impartiality and innovation with consistency, breadth and courage' (p. 137). The point here is not that these sentiments are invalid but rather that they need to be rigorously argued, instead of merely stated, in a collection which clearly aims to defend and bolster the BBC's increasingly uncertain status. Some of the pro-BBC assertions made here are simply *wrong*, such as Steve Barnett's extraordinary statement that the commercial market will 'marginalise' documentaries, science and arts programmes – an assertion that any viewer of the popular Discovery and History cable channels will find mystifying. For Barnett, quality drama means *Wives and Daughters*; for large sections of the television audience, it might equally mean truly innovative drama series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Oz*, *The Sopranos* or *Sex and the City* – all of which are commercial US offerings. Throughout *e-britannia*, the term 'quality' is bandied about as if it were a tangible object rather than a reflection of the tastes of the authors and BBC programme commissioners. Lacking both critical perspective and any attempt to engage meaningfully with the BBC's commercial competitors, many of the essays here are mired in a one-sided commentary that too often looks like little more than a public relations exercise.

As this criticism suggests, anyone seeking a considered, wide-ranging, in-depth analysis of the current state of play for global and national communications would do well to steer clear of this book. *E-britannia* does, however, provide valuable insights into the kinds of debates and issues that the BBC and the British government are attempting to engage with as multi-channel subscription television, digital convergence and globalization change the rules of play. *E-britannia* asks important questions: does public service broadcasting have a future?; does the British population still want it?; how can the BBC continue to justify the licence fee once analogue broadcasting stops and all television becomes subscription television?

But, having raised these questions, *e-britannia* produces only grievously inadequate answers. The question it never asks looms large over the proceedings: is the BBC really as good, as impartial, as diverse and as innovative as it would like us to think?